

Always and Forever

By: **The Queen of Double Standards**

Fandom: vocaloid

Summary: Gumi and Rin's friendship fell apart when they started struggling with feelings that neither was brave enough to share. Now, two years later, a mysterious boy enters Rin's life, and both she and Gumi wonder: has Rin fallen for this boy? RinXGumi RinXLen

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1. Wandering the Maze of Love

Author's Note: This fanfiction is loosely based on Gumi and Rin's song "Always and Forever". And, yes, it is yuri/shojo-ai/girls' love. All my chapter titles are line or parts of lines from the song. Also, the reason why I gave them different hairstyles than their standard styles is that this chapter happens two years before the rest of the story. I also made it so that all the characters (minus Kaito and Kiyoteru) are the same age, which is 16 after this chapter. And the story will flip between Gumi's and Rin's POV. Enjoy! Please read and review!

Chapter One

Wandering the Maze of Love

Two years ago . . .

Rin gazed in her bedroom mirror, her fingers running through her incredibly short hair as she grimaced at her reflection. In order to get a new start this semester, she'd decided to get a new haircut, and she was not pleased with it. She looked like a boy. Her hair was cut so short that it didn't even reach past her chin, and, because it was so short, there was nothing she could do to style it without it looking ridiculous. She couldn't even tie bows or ribbons in it. The large white bow that had been omnipresent all the previous semester looked completely out of place with the new style, so even that was out of the question. She looked at the white bow on her vanity table ruefully, wanting to where it for a reason deeper than the superficial fact that it made her look really cute. She wanted to wear it because it had been given to her by someone very important to her.

Rin started when a noise came from her window. She gazed at the window on the opposite side of her large room as another pebble was thrown at the glass pane. She grinned and made her way over to the window as more and more pebbles smacked against the glass. Sure enough, she was greeted with a smile and a wave from the streets below. Rin shoved the window open and shouted down, "Stop trying to break my window!"

"Just trying to make sure you were awake!" called back the visitor. "Wanna walk to school together?"

"Sure! One second, I'll be right down!"

"Hurry up, don't make me late!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Rin smiled as she closed her window. She cast a last look at her hopeless hair in the mirror and sighed, gazing longingly at the abandoned white bow. She checked to make sure no one was watching—not that anyone would be—and slipped the bow into her bag. She couldn't bare to leave it behind. Then, she rushed downstairs and exited into the faint chill of the crisp morning. Her friend stood there, waiting.

"Morning, Gumi," greeted Rin, feeling her heart speed up a little as she smiled at the green-haired girl.

"Morning," repeated Gumi. "Let's go."

They began their trek to school, which required plowing through a dew-filled meadow that hid behind Rin's home. Gumi and Rin had always played there when they were younger, and they'd still go sit out there sometimes when the weather was nice, but it was a pain to go through every morning when the long, dew-covered grass would scratch against their bare legs. The miniskirt of their sailor uniforms didn't do much for protecting them from the itchy grass. Gumi had taken to wearing black leggings that went up to her thighs, but when Rin had tried that, it hadn't had the same effect it had on Gumi's long, slender legs. So she was stuck dealing with the full wrath of the meadow which had once nurtured them.

Gumi was walking in front of Rin, so Rin was free to gaze at her without fear of being caught. Gumi was a good bit taller than Rin, and she also had a more feminine, sporty figure that had developed when she joined the tennis team. Her green hair already fell past her waist, but she claimed that she

still wanted it to be longer. Rin had the feeling she was competing with Miku, one of their classmates, who was also on the tennis team.

Rin couldn't help but feel a sting of jealousy when she thought of that. Miku seemed to be rather important to Gumi, maybe more important than Rin was to her.

Rin shook her head, embarrassed to have such thoughts in her head. If Gumi knew that Rin thought such things, how would she react? She'd probably get annoyed and impatient at Rin's insecurity. Gumi was so outgoing and sure of herself. Having such a soft-spoken, shy girl as her best friend must have been difficult for her.

Gumi twirled around to face Rin. Rin's face turned red, wondering if she'd been caught, but then she realized there was no way Gumi could know she'd been watching her.

"What happened to the bow I gave you?" questioned the green-haired girl.

Rin's heart fluttered. She hoped Gumi wouldn't notice her nervousness. "It just looks silly with my stupid new haircut," explained Rin, grasping a short lock of hair to try to demonstrate.

Gumi shrugged and turned back around, though she slowed her pace to walk side by side with Rin. "You still look cute, even with really short hair."

Rin laughed, though the compliment had pleased her. "Please. I look like a boy. I'd be screwed if it was a new school year. People would mistake me for a cross-dresser."

"No way. You're too cute for anyone to really think you're a boy." Gumi took a lock of Rin's hair between her fingers, her glittering green eyes running along the short strands. Rin's hammering heart felt like it would explode. Her eyes squeezed shut as she attempted to control herself. Gumi continued. "See, if had that hair, I'd look like a boy."

"No way," Rin denied passionately, astounded that Gumi could even think that. "You're too pretty to ever be mistaken for a boy." She bit down on her tongue. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. She'd gotten too carried away. She cringed, tensely awaiting Gumi's reaction.

But then Gumi smiled at her, a smile that sent Rin reeling and made her worry that her legs would buckle beneath her. "If you say so." Gumi then released Rin's hair and faced forward again. They resumed walking together in comfortable silence.

It was always like this when Rin was with Gumi. The other girl made her heart start racing and caused her face to flush. Rin had only noticed this recently, when Gumi had given her the white bow, which was hidden in Rin's backpack, and it had only caused Rin to get more confused. She was too scared to share her feelings, but it was so stressful being with Gumi when all these complicated emotions were muddling Rin's thoughts. Rin found herself being more and more careful about how she acted with Gumi, afraid that her feelings would be too obvious if she didn't exercise caution. After all, Gumi would never feel the same way, and if she did, she was so brave that she would have mentioned it long ago.

Rin and Gumi continued their walk, caught up in their own thoughts and extremely aware of each other, though neither spoke a single word.

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Gumi leaned back in her seat and groaned. Rin, who sat in the seat behind her, moved her books out of the way as Gumi's head fell onto the blonde's desk, her chair tipped as far back as she could get it. Rin grinned.

"C'mon, Gumi, we've only been back for one day. You had to do homework during summer break anyway, right?" consoled Rin.

"But sitting still for so long just *sucks*! I want to go home! I'm so bored!" whined Gumi.

"You still have tennis after this," pointed out Rin, rolling her eyes at her friend's immaturity. Gumi was always like this at school.

Gumi closed her eyes and let out an irritated noise. "Ugh, don't remind me."

"Well, that's not the kind of spirit you should be having," came another voice.

A girl with teal hair, tied up in a single ponytail that fell down to her knees and was tied up behind her head, came over to sit in the vacated seat next to Gumi's. Rin couldn't help but get a little tense when the girl arrived, jealousy prickling uncomfortably beneath her skin.

"I'm gonna tell the rest of the team you said that," teased the new girl.

"Miku," moaned Gumi. "Leave me alone. I'm trying to die here."

"Well, I can't allow that. We need you on the team."

"But it takes too much energy," whined Gumi.

Miku flicked Gumi playfully on the forehead. "Quit being lazy."

"Don't flick me!"

"I'll flick you if I want to," retorted Miku, a mischievous grin playing on her lips.

"You can't just go around flicking people!" exclaimed Gumi, opening one eye to glare at Miku.

"I don't go around flicking people, just you."

Rin watched as the two bantered back and forth, again feeling a sharp pang of jealousy. She wanted to join in the conversation, and she ran through things she could say a few times in her head, but she couldn't manage to have the words leave her mouth. So she just sat there and hoped Gumi would remember her sometime soon.

"Anyway, we gotta go," said Miku, dragging a lethargic Gumi to her feet. "Bye, Rin! See you tomorrow!" Miku cast Rin and smile, which Rin then felt obliged to return. Miku dragged Gumi away, and Gumi waved briefly to Rin before darting out of Miku's grip and racing the teal-haired girl to the gym.

Rin was the only one left in the class at this point, so complete silence surrounded her as she packed her bag up. She lifted to bow out and ran her finger across the silky fabric, a sad smile forming. Then, she left the classroom behind and headed home by herself.

. . .

Gumi had come over to Rin's house after her tennis practice and was currently splayed out across Rin's bed as Rin tried different styles with her hair in the mirror. Rin was ninety-nine percent sure that Gumi had fallen asleep, as she hadn't made a sound in over an hour. Rin frowned at her reflection and tugged out the ribbon she'd been working with, letting out an irritated sigh. Giving up for the moment, she went over to where Gumi was lying and gazed at the girl's closed eyes. Gumi's full, dark eyelashes fluttered a little as dreams ran through the green-haired girl's mind. Rin smiled at how peaceful the girl looked. Longing filled her soul, and, before she knew it, she was leaning in, drawing her face closer to the other girl's. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her face flushed such a bright red that it made her head reel. She placed her palm on the bed for support as she leaned closer.

And then her head collided with Gumi's as Gumi shot up with a yelp. Rin stumbled backward, new dizziness joining the old as she groaned, putting a hand to her forehead, which now pounding from banging against Gumi. She winced and looked at Gumi, who was in a similar position.

"What the heck was that for?" exclaimed Gumi, rubbing her aching forehead.

"W-was what for?" stammered Rin. Oh no, oh no, oh no! She'd been caught! Now Gumi would know how she felt!

Gumi gave Rin an irritated, unimpressed look. "You tugged on my hair and then made me head butt with you! If you wanted me to wake up, you could've tried a nicer method that didn't kill all my brain cells!"

Rin froze, relief coursing through her. She hadn't been caught. When she'd leaned on the bed, she'd also leaned on Gumi's unreasonably long hair, causing it to tug on Gumi's head and wake her up. Gumi didn't think anything beyond that had happened.

"You're a deep sleeper," said Rin with a shrug.

"Dummy," grumbled Gumi, rubbing her sore head. "Why did you have to wake me up?"

Rin scrambled for an excuse. "Um, we haven't done any homework yet. And I have something to give you."

"A present?" questioned Gumi, suddenly more awake than she had been all day. Rin couldn't help but notice that Gumi had completely ignored the part about homework. Typical. "What for?"

Rin turned away and knelt in front of her backpack, which on the ground beside her bedroom door. "No reason. I just thought I should get you something, since you got me the ribbon and all," murmured Rin as she rummaged through her backpack. Her heart was racing again. She struggled to control it as she held out a small shopping bag to Gumi.

Gumi took the bag eagerly and pulled out the gift. She dangled it in front of her face curiously. "Goggles?" she wondered. The goggles had a black frame and their lenses were red. Rin had seen them when she had gone to the shopping district on the way home.

Rin nodded, self-conscious of the gift now that she'd actually given it to Gumi. "I thought they'd look good on you," she said softly, averting her gaze.

When she gathered enough courage to look back, Gumi had put the goggles on, though the lenses were on the top of her head instead of over her eyes. She smiled broadly at Rin. "I love them," she told her, causing Rin to smile in return.

Rin cleared her throat and looked away before any more redness could come to her cheeks. "Now, onto homework."

Gumi groaned. "No, Rin, don't make me do it!"

Rin set their books at the short table in her room. "You're doing it."

After some arguing, Gumi resigned herself to her fate and took a seat at the table. They had barely started on their homework when she spoke again.

"I've decided," she announced. Rin looked up from her schoolwork with a glare to show that she was unimpressed at Gumi's short attention span. "I'm not gonna go to high school!"

Rin was shocked. Sure, high school was optional in Japan, but still, most students continued on. She couldn't understand why Gumi would refuse to continue. Well, actually, she could, but the reason wasn't very impressive. Rin looked down at her schoolwork with an exasperated sigh. "Miku's right. *You are lazy.*"

Gumi went silent, noting the slight bitter note in Rin's voice that the blonde had tried so hard to hide. Finally, she wondered aloud, "Are you jealous of Miku?"

"Not at all," said Rin, wearing the cat. Her voice was surprisingly steady as she continued in an almost monotone voice. "Why would you think that?"

Rin heard the rustling of clothes as Gumi looked back at her papers. "Never mind." For a moment, Rin could have sworn that she heard disappointment in Gumi's voice. She shook her head. No way. She was imagining it.

Silence fell over them as they worked, until Rin couldn't take it any longer. She said, not looking up, "I want you to go to highschool. That way, we can go to the same one."

More silence followed, until finally Gumi said, "You're right. I'll go to highschool with you. How else can we stay friends?"

Rin and Gumi looked up simultaneously and smiled to each other. It had all seemed so simple at the time. But, life was complicated, and they'd find that out sooner or later.

2. Until I Find the Fearless Self I Lost

Chapter Two

Until I Find the Fearless Self I Lost

Two years later . . .

"Gumigumigumigumigumi, wake up!"

Gumi was abruptly awoken by her best friend's voice. Gumi grumbled at having been woken up when she'd been in such a peaceful sleep. She grimaced as she felt the stiffness that always came from sleeping in her desk. She ran a hand through her hair to get it out of her face, her hands running into the goggles she always wore. Like it always did, thinking of the goggles made her nostalgic.

"Come on, Gumi! It's time to go to tennis!"

Gumi looked up groggily, gazing around herself, only to see that all the desks were empty. She blinked a few times, confused. "Where'd everybody go?"

The other girl rolled her eyes. "No duh, they left. Class is over."

Gumi's eyes widened, and she was suddenly awake. Class was over? No way! But she'd fallen asleep during second period! Surely Shion-sensei would have woken her up! He rarely tolerated her sleeping in class. She probably only got away with it once a week, and, even at that, he only let it slide for one period. But the whole day? No way! "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I am," came the response as the girl tried to muffle a laugh.

Now that the strange occurrence was verified, Gumi's energy level dropped again. She sighed and slumped in her seat, letting her eyes shut again.

"High school is so boring. Why'd I even agree to come?"

The green-haired girl let out a shout as she received a flick on the forehead. She jerked out of her seat and glared at the attacker. "Tennis. Now."

Gumi grumbled as she followed the other girl out of the classroom. Then, the other girl turned back to her and replied, "You agreed to come because Rin asked you to."

Gumi felt sadness wash over her as the words reached her ears. She had to hold back a sigh. She fiddled with her goggles and murmured, "Right."

. . .

Gumi and Rin were now in their second year of high school. They'd both gotten into the same school, as promised, though Gumi had hated all the times she'd had to study instead of sleep. Still, having that time of Rin all to herself was worth it. Rin was so special to her. That was why she still wore the goggles to this day, no matter how much they clashed with the school uniform. Gumi and Rin had been ecstatic to have gotten into the same school, and, even better, they'd been in the same class their first year.

However, there was a sort of tension in their relationship that neither one could deny, and they'd slowly drifted apart. Gumi's friendship with Miku had always been a sore spot for Rin, and maybe that was part of the reason why their friendship had become strained over time. After all, Gumi was the one and only friend Rin had, and Gumi knew it. But being with Rin was hard, because there were so many things Gumi wanted to say to Rin that she couldn't.

At the same time, they were into completely different things, anyway. Gumi was a sports girl—contrary to her infamous laziness—and Rin had soon joined the school's choir. Gumi wanted nothing more than to skip all her classes, or at least sleep through them, and Rin was trying her hardest to do well enough to get into Tokyo University. They'd found friends who suited them better, and, though they'd tried to stay friends, they hadn't managed to do it.

And now Gumi was left with a million regrets.

. . .

Of course, Miku was incredibly nosy, so, one day, on their way home from school, she had managed to get Gumi talking about Rin and her goggles. They'd been passing through the meadow behind Rin's house, and Miku had caught Gumi's sigh as the green-haired girl stared at the building.

"Gumi," Miku had said hesitantly. Gumi had quickly averted her gaze and smiled at the other girl. "Is there someone you like?"

Gumi's face had flushed red, and she'd waved her arms in front of her as she shouted denials. "Not at all, no one! Wh-why do you ask?"

Miku's eyes had flicked over to Gumi's goggles. "Those things look terrible with half the clothes you wear, including the school uniform. You don't even take them off when we play tennis. So what gives? Where'd they come from?"

Gumi's face had been beet red, making a laughable contrast to her green hair. A million Christmas-related jokes had run through Miku's mind, but this was too serious a situation to use any of them. The usual carefree Gumi had been replaced by an extremely distracted, serious doppelganger as she'd struggled to figure out what she could say in response. So, instead, Miku had waited until the seriousness was over and had let loose all the jokes at once after their conversation.

Gumi had realized that there was no point trying to hide it from Miku any longer. Miku was the kind of person who would keep pushing her until she got her answer. Still, Gumi had been afraid to say the words. She had been afraid that, somehow, Rin would find out. She'd had to lose her friendship with her to keep this secret.

"Rin gave them to me," Gumi had replied curtly.

But Miku still hadn't been satisfied. "You two are barely friends anymore. Why do you still wear them?"

Gumi face had grown redder by the second. She'd wanted to tell Miku, because she'd known it would be so much easier to have someone to share it with after keeping it in for so long, but she still had been unable to manage the bravery to speak the words.

Miku had obviously noticed that Gumi wasn't going to speak and had questioned, "Do you like Rin? You know, *that* kind of like?"

Gumi had frozen stiff and given a small nod, embarrassment rushing to her face to make the contrast even worse.

What she hadn't been expecting was for Miku to suddenly grab her in a giant hug. "Oh my gosh, Gumi, you're so cute! Why didn't you ever tell her?"

Gumi hadn't tried to move out of Miku's grasp merely because she'd been too embarrassed to look at the other girl. "I wasn't brave enough."

Miku had then pulled away and had looked at her friend as though this was a completely new idea to her. Gumi had let out a sigh inwardly. Then again, it kind of had been a new thing for Miku to consider. Miku was the kind of girl who simply told somebody when she liked them. She had no fear when it came to relationships. Then again, everyone loved her, so why should she be scared? She was even daring enough to go after a teacher for goodness's sake! And that was why Hiyama-sensei had refused to have Miku in his class their second year.

"Why don't you tell her now?" Miku had questioned.

Gumi had smiled at her, knowing that Miku could never fully understand her situation. "Because, when she's involved, I get too scared."

Miku had frowned, and then it seemed that she had acknowledged that she'd never understand Gumi's feelings in this matter. "Fine, but, if you wait too long, someone's gonna steal her away from you." She'd winked at Gumi before starting to walk again. Gumi had followed. "Maybe it'll be me. She's pretty cute, when her hair isn't cut like a boy's."

Then Gumi had stopped and, seething, even though she knew Miku had been teasing her to try to provoke her, she'd chased Miku as the teal-haired girl had run away laughing.

. . .

School was still boring. The only thing that made it worthwhile was lunch, when Gumi would pass by Rin's class and peep in to look at the blonde who had once been her best friend. Miku and Gumi always ate in the cafeteria with their friends, but Rin and her friends always ate in their classroom, so the only time Gumi could ever really see Rin was those brief moments when she passed by the classroom on her way to the cafeteria. Of course, Rin never noticed her. She was too busy with her new friends. She probably didn't even realize that Gumi's hair was completely different now.

Rin had grown out her hair so that it fell just shy of her shoulders, and she still wore the white ribbon in her hair everyday, and although that was probably because it made her look so completely adorable rather than any sentimentality, it still made Gumi happy. Gumi had chopped all her long hair off, realizing that, though she'd had Miku beat in length for a while, long hair was incredibly annoying. It got caught on people's zippers when passing by in the hallway, it collected dirt from the floor whenever she leaned down, and she constantly found herself sitting on it! The ponytail look didn't do her anything, so she'd just chopped all her hair to about shoulder length, leaving one longer clump on either side of her head. Miku now wore her hair in a high ponytail on either side of her head, claiming that it made her look cuter. Gumi hadn't argued, but she still didn't see why Miku had been so proud of the change of hairstyle. It wasn't such a dramatic change. It still fell past her knees.

In any case, Gumi still liked to imagine how Rin would have reacted if Gumi had come to her house with all her hair chopped off. She probably would have stood there in utter shock, gaping and making a home for flies in her mouth. Gumi giggled at the image.

Gumi looked in on Rin as she passed by the classroom. Rin was helping out one of her friends with his homework, peering over his shoulder and correcting his errors. He smiled up at her gratefully and they laughed. Gumi felt a twang of jealousy run through her. They were leaning so close together. Maybe they were a couple. No, no, it couldn't be. But, still, they looked so comfortable together, and they'd certainly make a cute couple.

"They're not," came a voice next to Gumi's ear. Gumi started and spun around, coming face-to-face with Miku, who gazed at her knowingly.

"How do you know?" quizzed Gumi, not bothering to wonder when Miku had arrived.

"I asked Luka," Miku replied promptly, looping an arm around Gumi and leading her away. Gumi tried to keep watching Rin and the boy, but Miku refused to let her. "He asked her out a few days. She said no, of course, but there's no way he'd move on so quickly."

"Oh," said Gumi, incredibly relieved. She hadn't realized how worked up she'd gotten over it. Then, Miku spoke again, and dread filled Gumi.

"But he'll move on eventually, and he and Rin *do* make a cute couple."

Author's Note: Hey there, thanks for reading! First off, I realized that my breaks within the chapter didn't show up when I posted it before (oi) so I think I fixed it. Won't know till I post it. And I just felt like letting you know that all those things I wrote about Gumi's long hair are based on my experiences. I had super long hair until a couple of months ago, and all those things happened to me, even when I tied it back. Long hair looks nice, but it's a total pain. So, anyway, please review, and thank you to all who read/reviewed the last chapter! Next chapter is Rin's view, and the story gets out of the introduction phase after that. Also, I don't use honorifics mainly because they're a pain to use. I just use the -sensei honorific because it sounds better than Mr. Shion or Mr. Hiyama. Thanks for reading!

3. On the Right Hand Love On the Left Jeal

Chapter Three

On the Right Hand, Love; On the Left, Jealousy

Rin was walking to the bus station with her friends after school when she saw *her* in the corner of her eyes. A flash of bright, grass green hair flickered in Rin's peripheral vision. Rin struggled to resist the urge to swing around and stare at the source in an obvious way that would draw her friends' attention. She instead peeked over her shoulder to where Gumi was leaning against the school's brick wall, surrounded by her friends, Miku, Luka, and Gakupo. They were enjoying a good laugh about something. Rin itched to know what it was. Whatever it was, it had Gumi smiling broadly. Rin flinched, jealousy seeping through her skin as Miku attacked Gumi in the form of a massive hug. Rin forced her eyes away and tuned back in to her friends' conversation.

"Please, Piko, you've lost your chance!" said the short little pinkish-red-haired cat girl, Iroha. "Give up already!"

"I haven't lost my chance, have I, Miki?" argued Piko, a white-haired boy with a cowlick on the top of his head that had proven impossible to tame, even after the three girls had spent a whole Sunday trying to flatten the piece of hair.

Miki took up a pensive look, though her eyes were smiling. "Hm, I dunno, Piko. Asking out another girl kind of tends to turn girls off. Right, Rin?"

Rin nodded, mock seriousness on her face to go along with the other girls' mood, though she'd been so zoned out that she had no idea what they were talking about. She managed to pull off a neutral, "Definitely."

"Wait a minute, I didn't ask her out! She was tutoring me! And she said no, anyway, right, Rin?" exclaimed Piko. He stared at her pleadingly. "Tell them, Rin!"

Rin caught on to what was going on. She laughed and decided that taking Iroha's side would be more fun. So, she put on her most mischievous face and averted her eyes from his gaze, fanning herself with her hand for added effect. "Well, Piko, if that wasn't a date, I'd like to see what you *do* do on a date."

Piko's face went red. "W-what in the world are you talking about? Rin!"

Miki frowned at him. "Well now, Piko. All this time I thought I was the only one for you. Maybe I'll have to let you go. I can't be with you if you're like *that*."

"Miki!" exclaimed Piko, growing more and more flustered by the second.

Iroha laughed, hugged Rin for her co-operation, and smirked at Piko. "See? Told you so."

Piko redirected all his energy into hating Iroha. He scowled at her and crossed his arms over his chest. "They're just taking your side because you're a girl."

"Go hang out with some boys then, stupid," retorted Iroha, scowling at him.

Piko grabbed onto Miki's arm and argued, "But then I wouldn't be able to be with my Miki."

Flames blazed in Iroha's yellow eyes. "No way! She's not your Miki! She's mine!"

When the two were deep into argument, Rin looked to Miki and wondered, "You know I was kidding, right?"

Miki nodded. "Of course. But look how cute they are."

Miki giggled as the two continued bickering, sparks of rivalry flashing between the two students. Rin turned to look at the pair as well. She always found these situations strange. Piko and Iroha were always battling over

which one of them Miki liked more, and Miki never seemed to mind, nor did she ever reveal favouring one or the other. Rin was pretty sure that Miki liked both of them the same. Still, these three so easily expressed their affection for one another, and, though none of their proclamations of love were accepted in any evident way, they didn't seem to mind. Rin knew that if she ever expressed her feelings and received no response, it would kill her.

Miki noticed Rin gazing at her curiously and tilted her head to the side with an inviting smile, a questioning look in her eyes. Rin's face grew red and she looked away. She could feel Miki continuing to stare at her as Rin took Piko's hand and tugged him away from a heated soon-to-be-physical battle with Iroha. He glared at Rin, who stared him down until he calmed down. It had become Rin's responsibility to break up these fights before they got too far because, if Miki were to do it, the two would just start fighting even worse. Piko sighed in defeat, knowing she would stare him down for hours if necessary, and turned his blue and green gaze away from her. Rin smiled at him and released him.

"Miki, what's going on over there?" asked the ever-curious Iroha.

Rin and Piko looked at the kittyler, who pointed over to where Rin had been watching Gumi earlier. Gumi was no longer against the wall. Instead, she was storming away from her group. Luka and Gakupo watched her go, confused. Miku chased after Gumi. She grabbed Gumi's hand, but Gumi wrenched away. Miku start shouting at Gumi, and Gumi returned the favour, though her tone seemed a lot more harsh than Miku's. Gumi's eyes made contact with Rin's for a moment. Rin felt her heart stutter, but then Gumi's gaze was turned back to Miku. More shouting ensued as Gumi whipped around and fled, Miku chasing after her, until they were both out of eyesight. The last and only words that Rin could make out of the whole mess were a loud, "Give it up! It's over!" from Gumi. Luka and Gakupo looked around, appearing completely lost. Rin's group turned back to themselves.

"I don't know what that was about," said Miki. "Tennis, maybe?"

"Why would they go crazy like that over tennis?" questioned Piko.

"Gumi's not the type to get angry, at least not like that," supplied Rin, at a total loss herself. "And Miku's really laid back."

Iroha was frowning, completely thrown off by what they'd just witnessed. "Even Piko and I never get that bad," she murmured. "Half the time we argue just 'cause it's fun."

Piko raised an eyebrow at her. "Speak for yourself."

"Why was Gumi so upset?" continued Iroha, completely ignoring Piko.

"I don't know," replied Miki. She took Rin's hand gently in her own. Rin started, realizing that she was still staring where Gumi and Miku had run off. Miki smiled sympathetically at Rin, noting how shaken the blonde was. Rin felt a small tug on her hand, urging her to continue walking. Rin accepted the request and let Miki lead her through the school gates as they all walked silently, trying to decode the situation.

Piko, Miki, and Iroha all took a city bus to their homes, so Rin would always walk to the bus station with them and then continue home by herself. However, today, Miki was so concerned for Rin that she wished to walk Rin home and then catch a later bus. Rin had been close to accepting when a thought went through her head: *he* would be home. Rin smiled and refused politely, no matter how much Miki insisted and asked if she was sure. So, in the end, Rin walked the rest of the way home, burdened by thoughts of Gumi, who she'd been trying so hard to keep out of her mind.

Then, when Rin arrived home, all thoughts of Gumi vanished. Excitement crackled along her body as she raced up the stairs and into her room. A bright smile lit her face as her eyes met his.

"I'm back," she said, a little out of breath from her mad dash.

"Welcome back, Rin," he replied with a smile that always got her heart thumping.

Without any other words, she began to tell him all about her day, especially the odd occurrence with Gumi, which seemed so much less important with him here.

. . .

"I've got it!" announced Iroha the next day at school. With her exclamation, she jumped out of her desk and smiled brightly at Rin, Piko, and Miki.

"Iroha," said Piko, trying to warn her with the tone of his voice as he glanced at all the classmates around them, who were now staring at her.

"Shush, you!" snapped Iroha. "It was a lover's quarrel!"

"What in the world are you talking about?" sighed Miki, amusement showing behind her exasperation.

"Yesterday, when Gu-" started Iroha.

Panic ran through Rin. She jumped to her feet and covered Iroha's mouth with her hand. Iroha made a muffled sound of annoyance, and Rin laughed nervously. "Now's not the time and place for that, Iroha," she growled through her smile. "Sorry, Hiyama-sensei. We'll try to control her better next time."

Kiyoteru stood at the chalkboard, annoyed at having his class interrupted yet again, but he was such an easygoing guy that all he did was smile softly at Rin. "Don't worry about that, Rin. She's not your responsibility." With a small sigh, he turned back to the board. "Besides, you say that every time."

Rin glared at Iroha and shoved her down into her seat. Iroha didn't even look apologetic. She simply looked annoyed. Rin's face grew red at the heat of all the gazes she could feel on herself and Iroha. A little bit of irritation pricked Rin. Why did Iroha have to be such a handful? Having all these gazes on her was so embarrassing!

Iroha continued gazing at the clock impatiently, waiting for lunch to come. She must have been really eager to share her hypothesis. She didn't even pretend to pay attention to Kiyoteru, much to their teacher's irritation.

When finally the bell rang, Iroha jumped up and didn't even wait for the group to push their seats together. She jumped onto Piko's desk, which was right in front of Rin's and behind Miki's, and sat on it. Piko gazed at her with repressed emotions.

"So, I figured it out!" she announced again, her energy level up. "What happened is that Gumi and Miku were having a fight because they're actually together but it's a secret, which is why Luka and Gakupo were so confused. Miku didn't want it to be a secret anymore, so she was hinting about it to Gakupo and Luka, so then Gumi got mad and stormed off, and Miku followed her to try to apologize, but Gumi's fed up with Miku, which is why she said 'Give it up, it's over!' She was breaking up with her! So, Miku chased her to try to make up with her." Iroha nodded, self-satisfied with the explanation.

Despite the absurdity of the explanation, Rin felt herself go numb. Was Iroha right? Were Gumi and Miku in love? Had Gumi fallen in love?

Miki noticed Rin's odd reaction and took an oddly sharp tone with Iroha, looking annoyed for the first time since Rin had known her. "What are you basing this on?" she questioned.

Iroha looked confused for a moment and responded slowly, "Um, what we saw yesterday. What else?"

"So you have no real reason to believe that Miku and Gumi were, or are, in a relationship?"

Iroha frowned, unused to being subject to any negative emotion from Miki. "No," she said after a moment, a tad embarrassed.

"Then all you're doing is spreading rumours. Don't go saying such things without solid proof." Miki turned to the bento boxes Piko had retrieved for

them and picked out hers and Rin's. She nudged Rin a little so that she could share her seat and placed their lunches on Rin's desk.

Iroha frowned deeper and jumped off of Piko's desk. She took her bento box and sat back on her seat. Without looking at Miki, she commented, "You're mean today."

Miki said nothing in response, picking through her lunch as she tried to decide what to eat. Piko, feeling the tension in the air, said nothing and stayed in his seat to eat his lunch in silence. Despite the tension, Rin felt deep relief. Miki was right. Iroha had no reason to believe that Miku and Gumi were dating. It was nothing but gossip. Rin felt gratitude toward Miki, and, when she looked at the other girl, Miki smiled at her. Rin smiled back before turning back to her lunch, suddenly being struck by a nagging suspicion: had Miki realized Rin's feelings for Gumi?

. . .

Lunch had gone by silently, and so had class. Well, until something odd happened. Instead of a student being called out to the hall, their teacher was called out to the hall. Iroha, who had been giving them the silent treatment until now, was too excited by this to keep quiet any longer. The entire class erupted in whispers.

"What do you think is going on?" Iroha questioned Rin. Piko and Miki turned around in their seats to join the two in conversation.

"No idea," stated Rin, trying to peek out of the window on the shut door, but all she could see was the back of Kiyoteru's head.

"Maybe something happened to his family. Is he married?" wondered Piko.

"I don't think so. I've never seen any pictures," supplied Miki.

"This is so weird," said Iroha, though she looked more eager than anything. "Shh, here he comes!"

Everyone went silent as Kiyoteru re-entered the classroom. All the students who had turned around were now facing forward, and even those who hadn't been paying attention all day were now all ears. Kiyoteru cleared his throat. "It appears we have a transfer student."

"At this time of year?" wondered a male student whose name Rin couldn't recall.

"Why didn't he come during home room?" quizzed Iroha, eager for information.

"Quiet, you two. There were unusual circumstances. Anyway, everyone, please welcome your newest classmate. Be nice to him and make him feel welcomed." He called over to the door, "You can come in now."

Everyone's eyes were glued to the door as the new student entered. Rin froze, completely stunned, and she couldn't stop herself from saying, "Len?"

Author's Note: Finally, Len enters. I actually wrote chapters 2-7 all in one day when my friend was too tired to hang out so thank her. And I wrote chapter 8 during a long car drive. So, I'll be updating every couple days, but I was on vacation without Internet all week so yeah. If you've read this far, why not review? Please and thank you!

4. And Still Today It Rains Sadness

Chapter Four

And Still Today It Rains Sadness

"Hey, Gumi!" called Gakupo. Gumi flinched. She'd been avoiding her friends all day, unable to face them after yesterday. She'd done the best she could to deal with them during class, like getting started on her homework instead of talking to them during breaks between classes, but now, after school, at her locker, there was nothing she could do to avoid Gakupo as he leaned against the locker next to hers.

"What?" she questioned irritably, pretending to be busy organizing her locker in order to avoid looking at the purple-haired boy.

"I just wanted to check that you were okay," said Gakupo, completely unfazed by her rudeness.

"I'm fine. Go away."

Gakupo sighed and gazed at her with a sympathetic expression that made Gumi want to pull his ridiculously long ponytail off his head. "Look, Miku explained it all to us."

Gumi froze and called Miku a choice word before slamming her locker shut. She swung her bag over her shoulder and began storming down the hallway. Everyone moved out of her way as she plowed down the hall. Gakupo followed loyally behind her, which only caused her anger to increase. Boys never seemed to understand when girls wanted to be left alone, and Gakupo was no exception. Gakupo was irritating the hell out of her right now, though he wasn't nearly as bad as her so-called best friend.

Miku had told them? She'd *told* them? That jerk! What right did she have to share something that Gumi had told her in confidence? And she'd done it without even asking Gumi at that! What if Luka or Gakupo told someone and Rin found out about it, or what if they told Rin herself? Miku was

terrible! Why is the world would she do something so terrible? She *knew* how torn up Gumi was by the entire situation! Yesterday, when Gumi had seen Rin and Piko holding hands, their faces so close as Rin smiled at him, she'd been unable to take it. She'd tried to leave, but Miku wouldn't let her, trying to convince her that it was nothing, but how could something so intimate be nothing? Rin and Piko were obviously into each other, so it was all over for Gumi, and she'd told Miku that. But, even if it was over, that didn't give Miku the right to blab about Gumi's feelings to the first person she saw afterward!

"Gumi, wait up," insisted Gakupo, though his long legs made it so he kept up with her easily.

"I don't want to talk about it," insisted Gumi, feeling tears pricking the corners of her eyes as her voice wavered. She swallowed hard, unused to the struggle it took to keep her voice steady.

"Gumi, I've been friends with Luka all my life. I'm used to this sort of thing. There's no need to be embarrassed."

"Don't even try to put us on the same level," snapped Gumi, refusing to turn around and properly acknowledge Gakupo as she continued to storm down the hall, her eyes set on the door at the end of the hall. Luka had never had deep feelings for anyone. How could her feelings be anything like what Gumi felt for Rin?

"Trust me, she's even worse than you when it comes," persisted Gakupo.

"Gakupo, I don't want to talk about it," repeated Gumi, her patience coming to an end. She burst through the door, hitting a nearby student who stood in its way/

"You don't have to talk about it, just hang out with us again. C'mon, Gumi, we're your friends. We don't care how psychotic you act, we just want to be with you."

Now that they were outside, out of the crowded hallway, Gumi didn't have to worry about hitting anyone with her backpack when she spun around. Gakupo nearly crashed into her, startled by her sudden stop, but he didn't dare mention it when he made eye contact with her. Her eyes were ablaze, anger radiating through her entire body. "Psychotic?" she snapped, her voice trembling a little. "You make me sound like a freaking yandere. It's not like I killed someone or anything."

Now Gakupo looked confused. Slowly, picking his words carefully, he responded, "I wasn't implying that."

"Well you might as well have been," growled Gumi.

"Gumi!" came a voice just as Gumi was about to storm off again. Gumi refused to acknowledge the voice as Miku ran up to the two of them. She stood stock-still as Miku looped her arm around her shoulder. "Sorry, Gumi, I had to tell them that it was about that time of the month for you. I couldn't figure out how else to explain your crazy mood swings."

Gumi was full out ready to snap at Miku and refuse to accept the apology. Her mouth opened right was the words finally decoded themselves in her ears.

Hold on a second. Time of the month?

Gumi felt herself deflate, all the anger blowing out of her and a certain numbness and embarrassment taking its place. She closed her mouth, knowing the words she was going to say were pointless now. Time of the month? Miku had said she was PMS-ing? She hadn't spilled her secret? That would mean Gumi had blown up at Gakupo over something that must've seemed incredibly immature to him. Her face glowed red. Oh gosh. How could she explain this?

Well, while the lie was out there, maybe going along with it would come in handy.

Gumi giggled for a second, truly relieved, and then it exploded into a full laugh. "Oh, okay," she giggled, unable to control the laughter. She couldn't believe she'd gone so crazy. That wasn't like her usual easygoing, relaxed self.

Gakupo just stared at them in shock for a moment before turning his gaze to Miku. "My gosh, Miku, you are a goddess! One touch from you and she calms down," he said in adulation.

Miku flicked the hair from one of her ponytails, her nose up in the air. "Well, you could say that, but, truly, my skills lie in a more intimate place."

Gumi rolled her eyes. Gakupo smirked and began flirting harmlessly back and forth with Miku. The two constantly participated in innocent flirting, though they never seemed to actually go anywhere with it. Of course, Gumi and Luka always stopped them when it was taking a turn toward something that rated higher than PG. They didn't want to hear those two talk about that kind of stuff with each other.

"So, Gumi," said Miku abruptly, having grown bored of her flirtation with Gakupo. "Have you heard the latest gossip?"

"I haven't really been in a gossipy mood today," said Gumi, freeing herself from Miku's grasp to lean against the school's wall.

"Class 2-C has a new student," announced Miku. "A boy."

Gakupo laughed, though he looked slightly dejected at being pushed aside so quickly. "Come on, Miku, Gumi's never had any interest in romance before. Why would she change just for this new transfer student?"

But Gumi had perked up at Rin's class number. A new student? This time of year? "What's he like?" she couldn't help but ask.

"See, I told you," said Gakupo. Then, he heard what she said and turned to her in astonishment. "Wait, what?" He was in a state of shock, perplexed by Gumi interest in anyone other than her group. Then, he seemed to accept

that it was just another sign that it was her time of the month and distracted himself with his bag as Miku began blabbering.

"Get this," said Miku excitedly. "So, you know how you gotta introduce yourself and stuff on your first day? Well, as an introduction, he was just like 'I'm sure you're all looking forward to a great year with me, and I know you're all eager to take good care of me.' And then he just winked at them!"

"Well, what a conceited little jerk," said Gakupo, unimpressed.

"I know, right?" replied Miku, excitement glimmering in her eyes. "He's just my type!"

Gumi felt herself grow steadily more tense. There was a boy like that in Rin's class? But he sounded like such a player. And Rin was so nice that she'd have trouble turning down anyone, even if they were a pervert, like Gumi thought this boy was from his introduction. Her impression could be wrong, but, if it wasn't, she was concerned for Rin.

"Okay, and here's the really weird twist," said Miku, drawing Gumi out of her thoughts. "His name is Kagamine Len."

Gumi froze. His name was *what*?

Gakupo noticed too. "Isn't there a girl in that class with that last name, too?"

Miku nodded. "Yep. Kagamine Rin. Their names even sound similar, huh? But, oddly enough, this Len guy insists that he and Rin aren't related whatsoever. So weird, huh?"

"Yeah," agreed Gumi numbly.

Miku made eye contact with Gumi to make sure that she was paying close attention to the next words. "Anyway, Rin seemed to have an interest in this boy, so anyone who wants her better snatch her up fast."

Gumi's whole body went cold.

The words dug deep into her and echoed over and over in her ears, even long after she'd arrived at home. From there, she'd proceeded to collapse on her bed and drown in her own thoughts.

What could she do? Why did it seem like Rin was surrounded by possible love interests? Gumi was even becoming unsure of Rin's relationship with that girl with the cowlick. Miki, she thought was the girl's name. When Gumi had passed by the lunch room, Rin and Miki had been sharing a seat, even though there had been plenty on empty seats. They had been sitting so close together, so comfortable, so at ease. Just like Rin seemed to be with that Piko boy, who Gumi was still sure had a thing for Rin. As if those two weren't enough to worry about, now she had to worry about this Len boy.

Gumi took off her goggles and lifted them into the air in front of her face, twirling them around her fingers. She truly cared deeply for Rin. She wasn't sure how she could deal with Rin being with someone else. She wanted to be with Rin so badly, but, even now, she couldn't find the courage to tell her. And, after all this time, how could she even have a chance? Rin had obviously moved on with her life, even if Gumi was still hung up on her. Even if Gumi could find the bravery to express her feelings, would Rin even taken her seriously now? After all, would someone who was in love truly just let the object of their affection go like Gumi had before?

Rolling over on her bed, Gumi felt her heart aching. She couldn't just give up. She didn't know how she'd survive if she lost Rin. Still, she had no idea what she could do now. No matter what, it would seem completely out of the blue. Would Rin even want anything to do with Gumi anymore? What if she was too busy with her new friends to let Gumi back into her life?

But she couldn't just give up. That wouldn't accomplish anything. Even if she failed, she had to try. She wasn't willing to give up Rin so easily.

Author's Note: Not much to say this time. I apologize to all Miku fans for having Gumi think such awful things about her. Oh, right, yandere is a person who is so insanely in love they do psychotic things, like stalking their love interests, killing rivals, or killing the love interest

**themselves. I couldn't think of a proper English equivalent. Anyway,
review please!**

5. Against the Chest of Stubborn You

Chapter Five

Against the Chest of Stubborn You

"Well then," said Kiyoteru after Kagamine Len had introduced himself. Even the teacher had been stunned by Len's bold introduction. "I guess you can sit over there." Kiyoteru pointed to the lone empty seat behind the male student—whose name still escaped Rin—who had spoken earlier.

"No thanks," said Len.

The class stared at him in shock. Such blatant rebellion was unusual in this school, or at least in this class. Their class had absolutely no delinquents, unless you counted Iroha's constant disturbances in class, but she didn't do that on purpose; it was just the way she was wired. So, the class had no idea how to react to Len's attitude.

"W-what?" sputtered the teacher after a moment of silence.

"I want to sit there," said Len, pointing to the seat next to Rin. Rin's face grew red. The female student who sat in that particular seat froze and looked to the teacher for assistance. However, Kiyoteru was still in a state of shock. Len didn't seem to see what the big deal was. However, he managed to make the situation better by saying, "See, I have bad eyesight. I can't see from that spot. It's too far back."

Liar, thought Rin, still struggling to make sense of this all. *There's nothing wrong with your eyesight.*

"Besides," continued Len, strolling over to the girl's seat, "she doesn't mind." He flashed her a dazzling smile. "Right?"

The girl's cheeks instantly flushed red. "N-n-n-no! Not at all!" she exclaimed, leaping out of her seat. She was completely flustered as she

collected her books. She ended up dropping a pencil, and Rin thought the girl would faint when Len picked it up for her.

Rin felt a flicker of jealousy run through all the girls in class, including herself. She was a little startled to have felt it herself. Maybe it was just because everyone else felt it. Like empathy? Sort of?

"Um, I guess that's okay then," said Kiyoteru.

Well, even if it's not, it's a little late to argue, Rin thought. The girl had gotten herself comfortable in what was supposed to be Len's seat, and now Len was sitting in the seat next to Rin's.

Kiyoteru cleared his throat to get the class's attention and turned back to the blackboard. "So, returning to class, the proper way to conjugate the English verb 'to write' in this situation would be 'written' instead of 'wrote' because the helping verb 'had' was used in front of it. However, in the situation here"

Rin stopped listening after the first line, too distracted by Len's presence next to her. She dared to peek at him for a second only to see that he was staring right at her. He smiled at her, that same dazzling smile he'd cast the other girl earlier. Rin couldn't look away, though his presence here still bothered her. She let the question show in her eyes, but his sole response was a finger placed to his lip. He was still smiling when he averted his gaze back to the teacher, though it changed to a closed-mouth smirk. Rin stared at him for a moment before turning her gaze back to the teacher. She'd just have to wait until class was over, then she'd find out why he was here.

. . .

Rin had planned on getting Len to explain himself immediately after school. However, she'd forgotten one thing: her friends. As the bell rang, many girls gazed at Len, trying to decide whether or not to go see him. However, any who'd even considered it lost their nerve when Len sat on Rin's seat and leaned down so that their faces were inches apart.

"Miss me?" he wondered.

Rin didn't have a chance to reply. Iroha was on them quickly. She and Miki were the only girls who hadn't fled by now. The rest had been too heartbroken to stay and watch Len's flirtation with Rin.

"You two know each other?" interrupted Iroha.

Len leaned away to smile extravagantly at Iroha. "Rin and I know each other better than anyone else knows either of us."

"How do you know each other?" asked Piko, growing a little protective as he took position beside Rin.

"We've shared a bed more than once," came Len's reply.

The three onlookers stared for a moment as Rin's cheeks caught on fire. Finally, Iroha ventured, "But you insisted that you weren't related."

Len smiled at her. "We're not."

"But then why—"

Len leaned down and put a finger to her lips. She froze, her cheeks growing red as her eyes locked with his. "Shh. If you can't figure it out, then I'd rather not taint your innocent mind." Playfulness glittered in his blue eyes as he smiled at her and drew away. She stared at him, and as if the single touch had left her completely infatuated.

"Don't go around spreading lies," said Rin, though she barely got the words out. She was so distracted by Len that she couldn't think clearly. Len looked down at her and smiled.

"So you two haven't shared a bed?" questioned Piko.

Rin's face reddened further. She gazed at Len's hand, which was on the desk in front of her, and followed the faint traces of bright colours on his skin, barely visible through his long sleeves. She couldn't bare to look at any of

her friends as she mumbled, "No, that part wasn't a lie. Just the implications. It was completely innocent, nothing like *that*."

Piko was stunned. "O~kay then, why were you sharing a bed?"

"Just let it go, Piko," begged Rin, embarrassment overwhelming her as her three friends and Len all gazed at her.

But Piko wasn't willing to be compliant today. "You expect me to just *let* something like that go?" snapped Piko, his green and blue eyes overflowing with anger as he swung his gaze to Len, who looked back at him coolly. "What is going on here?"

Len smirked at him. "Calm down, boy, it's not like she's your responsibility to protect from the big bad wolf."

"That doesn't mean I'm just going to let any random guy take advantage of her! I want to know—"

"Piko."

The group froze and turned their gazes away from the battling boys to stare at Miki, who was speaking for the first time since class had ended. She shook her head gently at Piko. He froze, confused.

"Come on," said Miki. "Let's go home. There's no clubs activities tonight. We don't want to miss the bus." Iroha and Piko could never argue with Miki, and now was no exception. They begrudgingly packed up their bags, both casting looks at Len as they did. Iroha's glances were that of a girl wanting to see as much of a guy she liked as possible. Piko's were that of an older brother wanting to protect his little sister from some guy she was dating. Still, they both exited the door and waited for Miki outside.

"Thanks," mumbled Rin gratefully once the two were gone. The red in her face had toned down now that it was just Len and Miki.

"No problem at all, Rin," replied the other girl. She glanced at Len, though Rin knew his eyes were still locked on her. "Are you going to be okay to get home?"

Rin nodded. "Of course I will."

"Okay," said Miki. "Call me if you have any problems, or if you just want to talk."

Rin could tell that Miki was confused, probably even more confused than Piko or Iroha, but she left Rin and Len as Rin had wanted her to. After watching the three go, Rin packed her bag in silence and left the room, feeling Len following behind her.

She didn't talk to him until they were alone in her bedroom. Even then, it took her a moment to finally say something.

"Why were you at my school?" she questioned.

"I missed you," replied Len promptly.

Rin felt exasperation lurking nearby. "So you decided to disrupt my class? How did you even get them to let you into the school in the middle of the semester?"

Len grinned wolfishly. "I'm *very* persuasive."

Rin sighed, knowing that he wasn't taking this seriously and never would. She sat down on her bed, letting the day's exhaustion attack her all at once. It hadn't even been a good day before Len had arrived. Ugh, why? Why couldn't things go back to being easy? Like . . . well, like before she'd noticed her feelings for Gumi!

Len frowned and sat beside her. Rin leaned against him, loving his comfort, even though he was making things overly complicated again, like when he'd first shown up in her life. She couldn't remember how long ago that had

been, but she could barely remember the time before he'd arrived, either. Just like how the time before Gumi seemed like nothing.

"You're thinking about her again, aren't you?" questioned Len.

Rin nodded hesitantly, knowing that it wasn't what he wanted to hear, but she also couldn't bring herself to lie to him.

He was quiet for a moment. Rin listened to his breathing in the silence, until he finally said, "I was hoping to meet her today."

If there was something Rin never wanted to happen, it was that. Still, if Len knew that she didn't want it to happen, he would make it his goal. That was just the kind of person he was. "I don't see her anymore, so I doubt you'll ever meet her," mumbled Rin indifferently, her lids falling a little from the effort it took to speak right now.

Len sighed and started twirling a lock of her hair around his finger. "That's too bad. I'd like to meet the girl who means so much to you."

"So you're gonna keep coming to school?" Rin wasn't sure which answer she wanted in this situation, yes or no. She knew having him at school would be trouble, but she also missed him when she was at school.

"Of course." He took her chin in his hand and gently turned her head toward him. He kissed her on the forehead. She gazed at him, half asleep, with a smile. "I can't stand being away from you all day."

Rin's face flushed a little. She yawned and leaned against him again. "Fine, just stop making people get the wrong idea." She knew there was no point arguing with him. He never gave up when he had his heart set on something.

"Fine, I won't." He moved away from her. She frowned at him. He smiled tenderly. "You're tired, Rin. You should go to sleep."

Rin wasn't ready for him to leave yet, so, when he turned to leave, she grabbed the back of his shirt. He stopped to look at her, and she gazed up at him and requested, "Will you sleep with me tonight?"

Len smiled gently at her, happiness in his voice as he answered, "Of course."

Rin ordered Len to face the wall, and he willingly obliged. She watched him as she slipped out of her uniform and into a white tank top and soft fleece pants that were covered in snowflakes. She crawled under the blankets, soon joined by Len, and snuggled against his chest, falling asleep immediately as she had many nights before.

Author's Note: Seriously, it's innocent. They're actually just sleeping. Okay? Okay. Same old request of 'Please review'!

6. Please Let Me Listen to Your Heart

Chapter Six

Please Let Me Listen to Your Heart

Gumi rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet anxiously, trying to gather her courage. It was lunch time right now, but, today, instead of going to the cafeteria to get her food, Gumi had brought a bento box. Of course, she might not end up eating at all. The way things were going right now, she'd spend all day outside class 2-C's door, trying to convince herself to go inside. Every time she thought she'd gathered the courage to go inside, she'd get cold feet right before opening the door.

"Gumi, nothing's gonna happen if you just stand there," remarked Miku, whisper-close in Gumi's ear. Gumi's heart sped up as she jumped and spun around.

"How long have you been there?" she questioned sharply.

"About three attempts to open the door," the teal-haired girl replied promptly. "Come on, you gotta do it."

"Don't pressure me," whined Gumi, taking Miku's appearance as a sign that she should give up. "It would look too weird if I came in now. Lunch is half over."

"Ugh, you're such a wimp! Come on, Gumi, just do it!"

"Look, Miku, I know you live by those words, but . . .," she trailed off, unsure how to finish the sentence.

Miku stared at her, unimpressed. "Okay, one: that was a terrible pun or joke or whatever. Two: stop being such a wimp!"

"Butt out of my business! This is something I have to do myself!" snapped Gumi, though it was incredibly weak. She knew she'd never do anything if

left to her own devices. She'd chicken out every time, like now.

Miku saw this and sighed, taking the box from Gumi's hands. "Fine, Gumi. If you're not ready, we'll do it some other time, okay?"

Gumi let out a sigh of relief and followed Miku as the teal-haired girl led her away.

. . .

After tennis practice, Miku convinced Gumi to go to the shopping district with her. It was Miku's turn to cook dinner at her house tonight, so she needed to get groceries, but she didn't want to go by herself. Gumi had been reluctant, but Miku had insisted that Gumi would do nothing but go home and pout otherwise, and Gumi knew it was true, so she couldn't really say no. And so, she ended up at the shopping district.

Miku picked out a teal beanie and placed it on her head. She struck a pose and asked Gumi, "What do you think? How does it look?"

Gumi grinned and said honestly. "It looks like an extension of your hair."

Miku frowned and put it back on its mannequin. "Well then," she sniffed. "Didn't feel the need to sugarcoat it?"

"Not even slightly," responded Gumi.

"Well, I think I like you better when you're pouting," said Miku as she dug through another rack of clothes. Her back was now pointedly facing Gumi. Gumi frowned, then she got an idea.

Gumi made her way around to the other side of the rack and walked through it so that she was in front of Miku. Miku couldn't help but laugh. Gumi smiled at her. "Nah, you love me."

"Maybe," laughed Miku, walking away. Gumi earned a glare from the cashier who was currently working, but she couldn't bring herself to be

bothered. Gumi chased after Miku and dashed in front of her. She grinned at her as the other girl tried to hold back a laugh at Gumi's childish behaviour.

"Say it," insisted Gumi. "Say you love me."

"Never," laughed Miku. "I'm an 'I love you' virgin, and I'm saving myself for someone special."

Gumi mock-pouted. "And I'm not special enough? Well then, maybe I'll go home."

Miku laughed. "Fine, fine. I love you, Gumi."

Gumi grinned. "Yeah you do. 'Cause I'm the best."

"'Cause you're the best," repeated Miku as she pushed Gumi aside to get to the next rack of clothing.

Gumi, satisfied, joined her in shuffling through the endless racks of clothes. However, she soon lost patience. She didn't have the attention span required for shopping. She had no idea how Miku did it. Gumi bounced back and forth on her heels, just for something to do, but that only kept her entertained for so long. She looked continuously at the big clock above the cashier, watching as ten slow minutes ticked by. The cashier still didn't seem to be a fan of Gumi's and was actively glaring at the energetic girl. Gumi spent a little while glaring back at the cashier, just for fun, but the cashier had more willpower than her. That, and she wasn't all that fun to look at for long expanses of time.

"Miku, aren't you supposed to be grocery shopping?" questioned Gumi.

"Fine, fine," sighed Miku, appearing out of the mass of clothing that had swallowed her up. "I'll come back some other time."

Miku exited, but, before Gumi followed, the green-haired girl stuck out her tongue at the cashier. She then fled quickly, giggling. Miku gazed at her suspiciously.

"What did you do?" she wondered.

"The cashier was annoying me," was all Gumi responded.

Miku sighed. "I guess I won't be going back in there anytime soon."

Gumi nodded her consent. "I would not do that if I were you."

Miku rolled her eyes, though she was smiling. "Great."

. . .

Miku had gone inside the grocery store and had left Gumi outside, sitting on a bench. She'd promised she wouldn't take long, and Gumi hoped that would be the case. It was already fall, so it was chilly outside, and the school's winter uniforms weren't as warm as they could be. Gumi alternated swinging her legs as she sat there, unsure what to do with herself. She looked around. The district wasn't particularly busy, only a few handfuls of people passing by. People watching wasn't very fun without many people. Gumi looked into the grocery store, but she didn't see Miku. Gumi gazed at a coffee shop a few stores down, wondering if she had enough time to go get something. She probably did, right? Well, it was cold out here and worth the risk.

Gumi swung off the bench and headed over to the coffee shop. She'd just get a hot chocolate, and, as payback for taking her into the store with the evil cashier, she wouldn't pick up one for Miku. She grinned at the plan, completely carefree, until a voice penetrated her ears.

"Two chocolate filled please," came the voice.

Gumi froze and peered across the street, where Rin stood at a taiyaki stand, smiling at the man serving her as he informed her that it would be a few minutes as he had to make them fresh. Rin rubbed her arms in the cold, shivering a little. Gumi stared at her, trying to regain control of herself. This was her chance. She could go see Rin now. Now. Now. Argh, why couldn't she move? *Come on, feet, move!*

Gumi gazed at the coffee shop behind her, sighed, and went inside. She'd just hide in here until Rin went away since she couldn't manage to find the courage. However, there was no line up, so she was served right away. The world just seemed to be against her.

Wait. What if she got a second hot chocolate to bring over to Rin? Right, that would work. She quickly requested another as the worker gave her the one she ordered. She didn't bother to collect her change as she handed over one thousand yen. She rushed outside, praying that Rin would still be there.

She was.

Gumi took a deep breath. A part of her had been hoping Rin wouldn't be there, giving Gumi another opportunity to chicken out. But, since she was here, it was now or never. And she couldn't let this hot chocolate go to waste, right?

Gumi was across the street before she could truly acknowledge what she was doing. However, when she got there, she couldn't manage to say anything, and Rin didn't notice her. Gumi stood there for a moment before thrusting the hot chocolate in front of Rin. Rin started and looked at where the hot chocolate came from. Her eye widened in shock and a million emotions buzzed through their blue depths.

"Gumi?" she questioned, not quite believing her eyes.

"Hi," Gumi managed. "You looked cold."

Rin stood there for a second longer, both of them just looking at each other in disbelief, and then took the hot chocolate with a grateful smile.

"Thanks, I was," she chirped cheerily. She blew on the top to try to cool it down a bit before taking a tentative sip. "Peppermint!" She beamed at Gumi. "My favourite!"

Gumi grinned. "I know."

"Here ya go," said the man at the taiyaki stand, handing Rin a bag. Rin smiled and thanked him.

"Why do servers like you more than they like me?" complained Gumi, refusing to let themselves fall into silence as she led Rin to a bench where they could sit.

"Because you're a troublemaker," replied Rin with a smile.

"But they don't know that!" argued Gumi.

"Trust me, anyone who looks at you knows it."

Gumi sighed. "Well then, I'm just doomed for life, aren't I?"

"You bet," laughed Rin. Gumi smiled, so happy to hear Rin's laugh when she was laughing for her. Hearing her laugh for Piko or Miki or even Iroha had ruffled Gumi's feathers more than she'd realized. "So, what are you doing here?"

Gumi didn't really want to say that she was here with Miku. It was already feeling like old times, when it was just the two of them. She wanted to keep it like that for as long as she could. "Just procrastinating. I have a test tomorrow that I do *not* feel like studying for. What are you doing?"

Rin opened her mouth to speak, but the voice that answered wasn't her own.

"We were shopping for new sheets. Rin's cat scratched up the old ones."

Gumi grew tense as Rin's hot chocolate was taken from her hands. Gumi followed it up to the lips of a blonde-haired boy. He had his hair draw back into a small ponytail, and the rest of his hair was drawn into small spikes. He took a gulp before handing it back to Rin.

"Um, Gumi, this is Len, my new classmate. Len, this is Gumi," said Rin tensely.

Gumi grew concerned. This boy seemed to be making Rin uncomfortable. Gumi felt the need to help her, but she knew that Rin would hate it if she overreacted. So, instead, she smiled at this boy, the new boy in Rin's class.

"Nice to meet you," she said, though she let her challenge show on her face. Rin was so focused on Len that she wouldn't notice.

"Likewise," said Len with a smirk.

They stood there tensely, the challenge lingering in the air between them. Gumi was not going to give up, not now. Not to this boy. Rin was hers, and she was not willing to share.

Author's Note: I want autumn to come. Is it obvious? Taiyaki is a pastry shaped like a fish, normally filled with bean paste, but it can have other fillings, too. Bento box is a lunch box. Review please!

7. Please Stay by My Side

Chapter Seven

Please Stay by My Side

It had all happened so quickly that Rin barely had time to react. She had been in a complete state of shock when Gumi had come out of nowhere, but it had made her so happy to see her again. And then Len had come. Rin had hoped Len would never meet Gumi, but that hadn't happened. And now she didn't know what to do. She couldn't do anything without feeling like she was picking one over the other, and she couldn't pick one of them!

The tension between the two was so thick that Rin thought it might suffocate her. They hadn't said anything other than the formalities since Rin had introduced them to each other. Rin frowned, at a complete loss. What could she do? Len and Gumi seemed lost in their own world as they glared at each other. She wasn't sure there was anything she could do now without making the situation worse.

"Hey, Rin!"

Rin, Gumi, and Len all turned their heads toward the voice. Miku dashed over the them, holding a paper bag of groceries as she ran across the street. Miku smiled, completely oblivious to the tension around her. She placed the groceries on the bench beside Rin, taking the place where Len should have sat. Rin flinched a bit, afraid of how Len would react. Miku drew Rin up into a startling hug.

"It's been so long!" exclaimed Miku. She picked up Rin's paper bag. "Ooh, what's this?" She peeked inside. "Ooh, taiyaki! Great idea! I want some too! Here, share these with Gumi, I'll go get some more." She jumped up from the bench and latched onto Len, whose face showed but the slightest trace of irritation. "Why hello. What's your name?"

"Len," he replied, instinctively revealing one of his radiant smiles.

"Well, you're pretty cute, Len. You've caused quite a stir at school. Let's go get some more taiyaki, 'kay?"

Miku was obviously just as stubborn as Len, and he'd evidently noticed that there was no way out when she had you in her grip, so he went along for the ride, letting her drag him along. The taiyaki stand was only a few shops away, but it gave Gumi and Rin a little privacy, at least. Rin thanked Miku silently.

"So, you and that Len guy," started Gumi.

Rin could see where this was going, and she didn't want to lose Gumi again, not so soon after she'd gotten her back. "Please don't," she requested.

Gumi stopped immediately and they fell into silence, listening to Miku chatter animatedly at Len. Rin knew she shouldn't be wasting this time, so she forced herself to speak again.

"Gumi, can we be friends again?" Rin asked, staring at her hands that had curled into balls on her lap.

"Well, it's not that we're not friends," Gumi began.

"Gumi," interrupted Rin. She looked the other girl in the eyes, letting all her emotions pour out. The heartbreak when she realized that Miku had become Gumi's closest friend, the pain of watching them from afar as she drifted further and further away, the regret whenever she'd see Gumi in the hallway, the anger from all the times Gumi had picked Miku over her, the loneliness of those months between the time they'd fallen apart and when Miku had found her, the confusion she felt every time she saw Gumi and knew she wasn't supposed to talk to her anymore. All of her emotions poured out with that one word as she gazed pleadingly at Gumi.

And then Gumi gave up trying to pretend. "You're right. I'm sorry. I want to be friends again, if you'll still put up with me." She gave a small smile, looking incredibly vulnerable in this moment as she braced herself for rejection.

Rin smiled, tears filling her eyes. She didn't trust her voice, so she nodded, squeezing her eyes shut before the tears could overflow. She felt Gumi's arms wrap around her as Rin let herself cry. She returned her friend's embrace, so happy to be able to be with her again. Just being this close to Gumi seemed like it would be all she'd ever need. All thoughts of Len vanished from her mind, Miku's inane babbling pushed out of her ears. The only thing in her world right now was her and Gumi, locked in an embrace after over a year without a single word spoken between the two.

. . .

When Rin had gotten home that night, Len hadn't spoken a single word to her, and, though his lack of acknowledgement still bothered her, it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been before. Now, she had Gumi. She had Gumi again. She didn't even care when Len left that night, though she realized after that he'd been waiting for her to ask for him to sleep with her in that time he'd been lingering in her room. Oh well. It's was too late now.

The silent treatment seemed to be over that morning. Len had greeted her in his normal upbeat, self-assured attitude. Rin had been glad to see this, though Len seemed to get a little stiff when she put on her white bow.

Len had fallen into silence again when he peered out the window after a pebble smacked the glass. Rin smiled, knowing what the pebble meant, and threw her window open. She beamed down at Gumi, who waved up at her.

"Do you know there's a boy in your room?" Gumi called up.

"He's a guest," Rin said quickly, though she didn't let Gumi seeing Len in her room get her too down. Today was her first day of being friends with Gumi again. She wasn't going to let anything screw it up.

"Well, as long as you know," laughed Gumi, her cheerful attitude mirroring Rin's. "Hurry up, I don't want to be late."

Rin laughed at that. "What do you care about being late?"

"If I'm late, you're late, and we can't let that happen," replied Gumi. "Now shoo! Go get ready!"

Rin smiled and closed the window. Len was leaning against the doorframe, looking annoyed and dejected. Rin rolled her eyes with a smile as she passed by him. "Stop sulking. You're still important to me."

"How important?" questioned Len, not following her. Rin froze and looked back at him. He had an incredibly serious look on his face, which was odd for him. "How do you feel about me, Rin?"

Rin blinked at him, her heart speeding up and her face flushing. His mournful eyes were so hypnotizing. Still, she shook her head and pulled her eyes away. "Len, I don't have time for this right now. Come on." She continued walking, but she didn't hear his footsteps following, so she turned back around with a sigh. Len looked absolutely stricken, devastated. Rin felt guilt well up in her. She went back to him and took his hands in hers. "I'm sorry, that was mean. But you can't do this to me first thing in the morning, Len."

Len frowned. "Why not? It should be easy."

Now it was Rin's turn to frown. "Len, expressing your feelings for someone isn't easy, not ever. It's . . . complicated." She shook her head. "Can we please talk about this later? We have to go to school."

Len nodded reluctantly, and this time he followed her when she left. Gumi was waiting for them right outside the door. She smiled brightly at Rin, but the smile faltered a little when she looked at Len. Len grinned at her, though there was a hint of mockery in the smile. Gumi scowled at him and took Rin's hand, tugging her along through the meadow. Len took Rin's other hand, glaring at Gumi. Rin was certain that this would be a long day.

. . .

At lunch, Miku and Gumi joined Rin, Len, Miki, Piko, and Iroha in their classroom. Len and Gumi immediately started another glaring war, even

before Gumi had taken a seat. Luckily, Miku thought to break the ice.

"Hiya, I'm Miku and this is Gumi," chirped the girl. "We were in Rin's class last year and the year before."

"I'm Piko," introduced one of the only boys in this group, "and these are Miki and Iroha. Iroha's the one making a fool of herself."

Iroha, who had been openly staring at Len, entranced by his entire existence as Miki and Piko had watched her in annoyance, whipped her head toward him. "Am not! Shut up!"

"Nice to meet you," said Miku. "So, I'm gonna sit with Len because he's really hot, and the rest of you do whatever you want."

It took the others a moment to realize that she was serious. She sat in the seat next to Len and smiled seductively at him. He returned the look, which admittedly had Rin a little jealous. He caught her eye and winked. Rin's face reddened, and she looked away.

"No way, I wanna sit with him too!" cried Iroha.

Miki and Piko fumed as she ran over to take the other free spot next to him. Rin could have sworn she saw steam coming out of their ears. Miki, a volcano that was teetering dangerously close to erupting, took a seat next to Iroha, and Piko sat on Miki's other side. Rin then sat next to Piko, and Gumi sat between Rin and Miku, completing the circle.

From there, the lunch consisted of Len, Iroha, and Miku flirting, Piko and Miki glaring at Iroha, Gumi and Len glaring at each other whenever possible, and a lot of catching up between Gumi and Rin, though it was mainly trivial things, small talk to keep busy.

But to Rin, it was better than anything. She had Gumi back, and that was all that mattered to her. Everything else could wait until a later date.

Author's Note: Miku saves the day! In her own special way. Anyway, thanks for all the reviews! Please review, once again~!

8. Fast Heartbeats Don't Slow Down

Chapter Eight

Fast Heartbeats Don't Slow Down

Gumi entered Rin's bedroom, and Rin followed closely behind her. For a moment, it felt like old times, when Gumi would always invite herself over and hang out at Rin's for hours on end after school. However, it soon became less like old times when Len followed after Rin. Out of Rin's line of sight, he smirked at Gumi, closing the door behind him and walking through the room with complete comfort, as if the room were his as well as Rin's. Gumi fought back a bought of anger when Len took a seat on the bed, which was where Gumi had always sat in old days. She was rather certain that he was aware of this fact and was just trying to get her to snap so that Rin would come to his defence. Instead, Gumi saw an opportunity in this and sat next to Rin on the vanity bench. Rin was a bit stunned by this, as she was aware Gumi hated the bench because it was too hard too even attempt to fall asleep on, and Len smirk faltered as Gumi passed him the sweetest of smiles. The bench was small, barely large enough to fit two people, and Gumi was enjoying making Len suffer, so she decided to get as close as she could to Rin, their shoulders brushing, the long strands of Gumi's hair tickling Rin's shoulder, fingertips brushing from where their hands lay on their knees. Gumi hoped that her pleasure at this closeness wasn't too obvious to Rin, but she also wanted to make sure Len knew Rin wasn't his to take.

"Um, so, should we do our schoolwork?" wondered Rin, her voice quavering a little. She must have noticed the tension in the air. Gumi felt a little bad for making Rin feel uncomfortable, but she was protecting her from Len, after all, so she was doing Rin a favour, even if the yellow-haired girl didn't know it.

Making sure Len was watching, Gumi put on her most whiny voice and splayed herself across Rin's lap, saying, "I don't want to, Rin. Please don't make me."

Rin laughed. "Come on, Gumi, you have to."

Gumi rolled onto her back as best as she could on the bench. Rin smiled down on her and Gumi put on her best pout. "Fine, but I want tea first."

Rin smiled and promised her tea, so Gumi got up off her lap and sat next to Len on the bed. Rin left to go get tea, and Len and Gumi stared off for a moment. However, when Len put on a mischievous smile, Gumi felt her heart's beating accelerate. For a moment, she could understand why Iroha and Miku were so entranced by this boy. His eyes were a glorious blue flecked with dark sparkles, and they seemed deep enough to drown in. His skin was icy pale and flawless, his lashes long and dark. His lips were full, just full enough to look attractive but not enough to make him look overly effeminate, and his eyes were similarly large. His cheekbones were perfectly arched and just prominent enough. His nose was placed perfectly on his face, and if it seemed as if, were you to go through it vertically, his face would mirror both sides perfectly. It was as if he'd been born to seduce.

Gumi pulled herself away, turning her eyes to her hands on her lap. Her face had grown flushed from staring at him, and her heart continued at its accelerated pace. She couldn't let herself think such things. He was the enemy, Rin's enemy. She had to protect Rin as best as she could, especially from him.

"Tea's ready," said Rin as she entered the room. She placed a tray with three tea cups and a kettle on the low table she used for homework. She poured the tea and served it to the two of them before getting herself a cup and taking a seat on her bench.

Gumi blew on her tea to cool it down and said casually, "Len, don't you think it's a bit inappropriate for you to sit on a girl's bed?"

Len, equally concentrated on his tea, replied, "Perhaps, but Rin and I have shared this bed so many times that I hardly think it an issue anymore."

"Len!" exclaimed Rin. Gumi was sure that Rin's face was beet red, but the green-haired girl could only feel a bit of shame for what she said next.

"Is that so? Because Rin and I used to share this bed all the time once we were introduced to the concept of sharing a bed." She took a sip of the warm tea. She tried not to let the others realize that she'd accidentally burnt her tongue and continue in the same casual tone, "Yes, sometimes we'd share this bed a few times a day."

"Gumi!" exclaimed Rin, completely embarrassed now.

"Is that so?" wondered Len.

"It is," agreed Gumi.

"I wonder whose company she prefers in bed."

"Well, mine, of course. I've known her all her life. I know what she likes when she goes to bed. Surely you can't be that experienced."

"Well, Gumi, if you must know, I have plenty of experience. I'm the ideal bedmate for any female. Something tells me no one other than Rin would be satisfied with *you* as their bedmate. Do you agree?"

Gumi's anger was beginning to build at the implications behind his words. "I may not have experience, but at least Rin is the only one I'd share a bed with. I'm so loyal to her bed that she wouldn't have to worry about me bringing in any . . . bedbugs."

"I assure you, no bedbugs would come from me. I'd never want to make Rin suffer in such a way. It's you who should worry about making her suffer."

Before Gumi could respond, she found a textbook on her lap. She looked up at a red-faced Rin who requested desperately, "Homework. Please."

. . .

Gumi was still peeved the next day at school, though no one could see it as she was busy acting like her usual, carefree self. However, underneath it, she was utterly frustrated by the fact that, when she had gone home last

night, which had been long after dark, Len had still been at Rin's house. He should have gone home long before Gumi! Why was he still there when it was so late that Gumi had had no choice but to leave?

Not fair! Not fair in the least!

That stupid boy. Why did he care so much about having Rin when he could easily have any other girl in the world? Though, Gumi did owe him for helping her gather the courage to rekindle her friendship with Rin.

Of course, now that they were friends again, Gumi had to deal with the issue of her feelings that she'd never expressed. Gumi had never been patient, and she was truly paying for it now. She'd already grown dissatisfied, wishing to tell Rin her feelings but unable to. Why couldn't she just be happy with being friends, at least for little? Maybe she could have been satisfied with that if it were not for the threat of Len hovering over her relationship with Rin every second.

Oh, speak of the devil, Gumi sighed inwardly as she caught sight of him in her peripheral vision as she passed him by in the school hallway. Rin wasn't with him, so she didn't care all that much. She could argue with him tonight, at Rin's house. Gumi had a lingering feeling of foreboding connected to Rin's house, which she assumed just meant Len would be there again. No point wasting her time with him now.

Gumi was about to lose herself in her thoughts again when she heard a giggle. She froze. It had come from behind her, where she'd just passed. She peered over her shoulder to see the source.

It was Neru, the girl with long yellow hair tumbling down only from the left side of her head, Class 2-B's outsider who spoke only to her best friend, Haku. Neru had never shown any romantic interest before, and she'd always been such a grouchy tomboy. Hearing her giggle was a shock to the system. And who had made her giggle? None other than Kagamine Len, the visitor to Rin's bed many nights, apparently.

They were speaking to each other so quietly that Gumi couldn't hear them, but Gumi could tell enough by their body language. Len had Neru pinned against the lockers, one hand in his pocket and the other supporting him against the locker as he leaned closer to Neru. Neru was fiddling with her long ponytail and smiling animatedly in return to Len's wolfish smile. Her brown eyes had widened to show interest as she leaned closer to Len, listening to the alluring words he murmured to her. Gumi thought she would be sick watching them. And, yet, at the same time, a part of her ached to be in Neru's place, under Len's hypnotizing stare.

Gumi shook the thought away. Where had that come from? Len made her sick. Besides, the only one she cared for that way was Rin. Come to think of it, why was Len like this when he seemed to want Rin so badly?

Gumi couldn't just stand by and let Len have his way with poor Neru. She also couldn't let him act in such a way if he planned on pursuing Rin. Gumi rushed over to where the two blondes stood at the lockers and stepped between them, facing Len. Her face was uncomfortably close to his, and he simply seemed amused by the interruption, not even mildly annoyed.

"Neru, get lost," ordered Gumi. "He's no good for you."

"What are you talking about?" snapped Neru. "We were just—"

"Talking? Yeah, right. Go find Haku or something."

Len's eyes parted with Gumi's for a moment, so Gumi assumed he was making eye contact with Neru, who must have been peering past Gumi. Len smiled to her. "No worries, my purple fox. We'll see each other again soon."

Neru, satisfied with his answer, left. Len and Gumi both watched her go before turning to stare at each other. Gumi expected a glare, but Len still wore that same amused look. Gumi could tell he wasn't going to be first to speak and said, "What are you doing?"

Len smirked at her. "Gaining experience points."

Gumi scowled at him. "Shut up. I'm serious. I thought you liked Rin."

Len's smirk fell a tad. "I do, very much. But she needs her space in order to come around, so I'm giving it to her."

Gumi couldn't believe his words. She wanted nothing more than to slap him right now. "You jerk! If you like someone, you can't just go around using other people to entertain yourself until they like you back!"

"Isn't that what you're doing here?" questioned Len.

Gumi felt her annoyance raise. "What?"

Then Len's arm was around her waist, pulling her toward him until there was no space left between them. The tension in Gumi's body rose, and so did her heart rate. Her face reddened despite herself. Her face was in Len's chest how they were positioned right now. She craned her head back to look him in the eye as he grinned at her and said, "You can't tell me you really care that much whether or not I cheat on Rin."

"I *do* care!" snapped Gumi, but he sounded so sure of himself that she started to doubt herself.

"Are you sure?" he murmured into her ear, his warm breath ruffling her hair. She shuddered, her heart threatening to break out of her chest. "Are you sure you weren't just jealous to see me like that with Neru?"

Gumi couldn't speak, afraid her voice would betray her. Anyway, the twinge of longing she'd felt when she'd seen Neru and Len haunted her. There was nothing she could say. But she had to get away, before anything else happened. But her feet refused to move, and she couldn't pull herself away from him.

"I wouldn't mind," his silken voice continued in her ear. "In fact, I think I'd quite enjoy it. You're more resistant than I'm used to. Most girls don't dare say no to me." His hand was suddenly under her chin, leading her face toward his. "Will you?"

Gumi's mind reeled, completely unsure what to do. She had to get away, but she couldn't form any words to tell him off. Even a basic "no" would suffice, but she couldn't find it in herself to bring forth the words. Len's face moved closer to hers. Finally, she managed to lift a hand in front of her and cover his mouth. He froze for a moment. She felt him smile wider.

"Is that all you've got?" he wondered.

Len took her hand in his and drew it down. She didn't fight him. Then, finally, his lips pressed against hers. Her eyes closed as he kissed her deeper, but she couldn't seem to fight against it. She felt like she was melting, and the only thing keeping her together was Len. When he pulled away, she almost reached out to pull him back, but she stopped herself, just in time, as he moved away. She leaned against the locker, too weak to move, staring at Len like a deer caught in headlights.

He smiled at her. "Well then, Gumi," he said. "Not bad. I may have to keep you around. I'd like to see"—his eyes followed the curves of her body as they travelled up, back to her eyes—"more of you. You obviously don't hate me as much as you thought."

Gumi simply stared at him, completely at a loss of what to do with herself. A part of her wanted to run as fast as she could, far away from her. Then, another wanted to jump on Len and beg him for more. But her weakened legs wouldn't allow for either.

"You know, Rin does that too," he said.

Gumi's weakness faded then and there. Rin. Rin. All doubts fled her mind as she thought of Rin. Anger flashed, red hot, through her body as she threw herself on Len, grabbing his shirt by the collar.

"Don't you dare say that!" hissed Gumi. "There's no way on Earth Rin would *ever* kiss you!"

Len frowned for a split second before smiling again. "No, no, Gumi dear. I meant playing around while she waits for the object of her affection to

come around."

"Liar!" spat Gumi, though she was relieved that that had been his meaning.

"Not at all. In fact, if you go to her locker now, you should see a prime example of it," insisted Len. He smiled at Gumi. "Anyway, no need to worry. You're the only one I've kissed since I got here. And, until Rin comes around, I plan on kissing no one other."

Gumi watched as he left, unable to find the energy to stop him. He'd better find someone else to kiss if he planned on doing it anymore. He may have stolen Gumi's first kiss, but she would not let him have any more.

Author's Note: Wow, longer than I'd expected... Oh well. This was written on a car ride home along my one shot *Stop Calling Me SF-A2!* It's like a six hour ride. I got really uncomfortable writing this because family members were attempting to read over my shoulder. . . and, y'know, I don't really want them to read this. I ended up turning the screen really dark so that no one could read it So yeah, hope you liked it. Or, um, I guess didn't considering the scene. Um, yeah. Review please?

9. With This Moment

Chapter Nine

With This Moment

Rin was at her locker after choir practice with Miki. Piko had been sent on a mission to find Iroha, who had immediately gone off searching for Len once the bell had signalled the end of the day. Rin was a little jealous at Iroha's open affection for Len. Rin cared deeply for Len, but she didn't ever show him her affection in such an obvious way. Then again, the feelings Rin had for Len were different those that Iroha had for him, right?

Miki was beyond irritated. She didn't even bother to hide it now that she and Rin were alone. She didn't state her displeasure openly, but it was obvious in the way that her arms were crossed across her chest instead of her usual habit of having her hands clasped together in front of her.

"Where's Len from?" Miki questioned suddenly.

Rin froze. She shuffled some books around in her locker, though the rearrangement served no purpose other than avoiding looking at Miki. "I'm not sure."

Miki, dissatisfied, shot off another question. "When did you two meet?"

Rin saw no danger in answering this and thought for a moment. "A few months ago, I think. He was new to the neighbourhood and needed a friend." She was slanting the truth a little, but she couldn't think of a better response that Len would find appropriate.

"Why did he just enter now, then? Wouldn't it have been easier to enter at the beginning of the new semester? I mean, if he was already here and all."

"Who knows what goes through his mind?" sighed Rin, unable to admit that he just wanted to be closer to Rin and didn't care a bit about school. Then

again, if he wanted to spend time with her, then where was he right now? Rin felt a prick of annoyance at this.

Rin shook the thought away and shut her locker decisively to try to prevent Miki from asking more questions. However, Miki wouldn't be deterred.

"Why did he move here?" she questioned.

Rin sighed, giving up on going home early. Still, she didn't want to answer Miki's questions so she dared one of her own. "Why do you care so much?"

Miki was a bit startled by Rin's question. After all, she wasn't used to having Rin initiate conversation. Rin normally just went along with whatever the other three were doing. Miki seemed to decide that encouraging this behaviour was the most important thing to do right now.

"Iroha's always liked me the best," said Miki, seeming a little embarrassed by how audacious and self-centred her reply sounded. "So, obviously, I'm bothered by the fact that she's paying him more attention than me." She stared Rin in boldly in the eye, as if daring her to call her out on how conceited her words were. However, Rin felt no need to do so. She went for a different route instead.

"I don't really understand your relationship with them," said Rin cautiously, watching for Miki's reaction to make sure she wasn't too out of line. Miki didn't seem bothered so far, so Rin took another tentative step forward. "It seems like you just lead them both on, and they don't seem to mind. I'd hate feeling like I had . . ." she trailed off for a moment, thinking of Gumi, "absolutely no chance, no matter what I did."

Miki's rage faded into sympathy for the blonde girl. She took Rin's hands in her own and smiled tenderly at her, the gentleness in her eyes soothing Rin. Her voice caressed Rin's ears as she began to speak softly. "It's not like that, Rin. They don't feel like they have no chance."

"How do you know?" Rin wondered, lulled by Miki's melodious voice.

"Because this is how our relationship is. Believe me, Rin, neither of them would truly be happy if I chose one over the other, even if they were the one I chose."

Rin shook her head at the other girl. "No way, Miki. Nothing would make them happier than being the one you cared for the most."

Miki thought for a second, trying to figure out how to best explain it. "I'm not the only one they love, Rin. They love each other, too, they just show it differently than they do with me. They wouldn't be happy being exclusively mine. They're also not satisfied just with each other. They love both me and each other equally, so the only way they can be happy is to fight over me, because then they still have each other. And, likewise, I love them both equally, and I love them both together." She paused and took up a pensive look as she tried to decide whether she'd explained it well. "Does that make any sense?"

Rin tried to sort out the words, but the concept was quite strange. So, instead of being an official couple, the three would stay in an eternal love triangle because they loved the two others, but only as a group? It was even more confusing than Rin's situation.

Miki peered over Rin's shoulder and released her hands before Rin had a chance to reply. She smiled at Rin's questioning look. "Think about it. In the mean time, I believe someone wants your attention, and I have two rascals to go find."

Miki winked at Rin before walking past her. Rin turned her head to watch Miki over her shoulder. Miki smiled at Gakupo, who stood a few steps away, behind Rin, and said as she passed by, "She's all yours."

"M-Miki?" stammered Rin, nervousness suffocating her. No, no, no! Rin was *terrible* with people she didn't know well, and Miki knew that! How could Miki leave her alone with someone she barely knew?

Miki smiled over her shoulder and skipped out of the hallway, turning a corner and leaving Rin completely alone with Gakupo. Rin smiled

nervously at Gakupo, who looked equally nervous as well.

"Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?" she wondered, turning to face him, but her voice was probably barely audible. Her natural timidity crippled her, though, and she couldn't manage to make it any louder.

"Y-yes," said Gakupo, his face crimson. He stood there just as stiffly as her. He didn't say anything more, and Rin didn't know what else to say, so they ended up just standing there for a moment.

Gakupo seems deep in thought, Rin thought curiously as she gazed into the tall boy's eyes. He seemed to be running through a complicated math problem or something in his head. Rin could tell it was difficult for him so she let him alone while he came to a conclusion.

"Rin," he started. She smiled at him to prompt him to continue. His face reddened further, but he didn't release her gaze. "Are you seeing anyone?"

The question caught Rin off guard. Her face burst into a bright shade of red and her gaze fell to her feet. "N-no. Why do you ask?"

"W-well, I was wondering if, maybe, you'd consider going out with me."

Rin looked up abruptly, startled by the question. Had he just asked her out? He had, hadn't he? But she couldn't go out with him. However, she had no idea what to do in this situation. She didn't want to hurt his feelings by rejecting him, but she couldn't say yes. She struggled to find an appropriate answer when Gakupo sighed.

"Miku was right, then," he said. "You like somebody else, don't you?"

Rin's heart stuttered. "W-what?" she managed. Did Miku know how Rin felt about Gumi? Had she told Luka and Gakupo about it, or, even worse, Gumi?

"That Len boy. You like him, right?"

Rin was fully prepared to deny vigorously when the words caught in her throat. Len? Did she like *Len*? Not Gumi?

Her forehead creased in confusion. Did she? She couldn't, could she? Gumi was the one she liked, wasn't she? So then why did Rin find it so difficult to answer the question? All she had to say was no. But now she wasn't sure if that was the truthful answer.

Rin gathered her courage and opted out of answering by walking over to Gakupo and laying a gentle kiss on his cheek.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I do like someone else."

When she pulled away to look at him, she saw sadness in Gakupo's eyes and felt immediate guilt for being the cause of it. They stared at each other, their faces inches apart, each lost in their own worlds.

What if Rin decided to confess to Gumi and Gumi shot her down? She didn't believe Gakupo liked her as much as she liked Gumi, so the pain would be much, much worse for her. She had no idea how she could bare it.

Furthermore, lingering in the corner of her mind was Len. How did she feel about this boy? Surely she couldn't have feelings for him? He was Len, after all. He'd been there for her all this time, sure, but that was because he was her friend, right? Right?

"Am I interrupting anything?" asked a clipped voice.

Rin pulled herself a couple steps back, away from Gakupo, and looked to the familiar voice. Gumi stood there, an unreadable expression on her face. Shadows covered her eyes, hiding their green gaze. Redness spread all the way to Rin's ears when she realized what it must have looked like to Gumi, seeing Rin with her face merely inches apart from Gakupo's. Gakupo realized this too and excused himself, leaving the two girls alone.

"Let's go," said Gumi without looking at Rin. Rin nodded, afraid to speak, and followed her out through the hallways, all the while trying to figure out

what she could say to explain herself. Gumi walked swiftly in front of Rin, refusing to turn around and look at the other girl. It was killing Rin.

No words were spoken between the two of them until they reached the meadow behind Rin's house, when Rin finally forced words out of her mouth. "Look, Gumi, it isn't what you think."

"Shut up," said Gumi sharply. Rin flinched at the words. Gumi had never said those words to her, especially not in such a harsh tone. Gumi stopped in her tracks, and so did Rin. "Look, why would it even matter to me, right? You're allowed to see anyone you want. I mean, why not? It's not like you're taken, right?"

Rin didn't know what to say to that, but it stung her to hear the words. She'd always thought of herself as Gumi's, even if she'd never told Gumi how she felt. Hearing Gumi say that was like being assured that she had no chance with her.

No chance whatsoever.

Gumi started walking again, and she didn't slow down when she came to the door to Rin's house. Rin grabbed Gumi's sleeve before the girl could continue walking.

"Aren't you going to come in?" she wondered, a thin trail of grief weaving into her voice. She stared at Gumi, even though the other girl still wouldn't look at her.

"Is *he* going to be there?" Gumi questioned.

Rin flinched and released Gumi's sleeve. Quietly, she replied, "Yes."

Gumi still wouldn't turn around as she said, "Then I'm not coming. I refuse to be anywhere near him."

Rin felt tears pricking her eyes. She was always with Len, so if Gumi wouldn't be wherever Len was, how could Rin be with her? "Gumi"

Gumi whipped around and stared Rin right in the eye. Rin was startled to see a glimmer of tears in Gumi's eyes and on her cheeks. "Why do you even need him, Rin? Aren't I good enough for you?"

"Gumi, he's no different from Piko or Miki or Iroha," argued Rin pathetically, all the while sensing that her words were a lie. "He's a friend I made, like you with Luka and Miku and Gakupo."

"Well you might want to tell him that!" barked Gumi. Then, she turned away. "I'm leaving."

Rin watched Gumi as the girl made her exit. Then, she looked up at her bedroom window. As she suspected, Len stood there, watching her. Rin turned her gaze to Gumi's departing figure, then to Len's haunting stare in the window above.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to him, certain that he would hear her.

Then, she ran after Gumi.

Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who reviewed. It made me feel a lot better after a sucky first day at a new school. I won't be able to update as often now that school has started but I promise to update at least once a week, hopefully more.

10. Don't Think About Tomorrow's Things

Chapter Ten

Don't Think About Tomorrow's Things

"Gumi, wait up!" called Rin as Gumi rushed away. But Gumi refused to slow down. She didn't want Rin seeing her in this state. Tears had forced their way out of Gumi's eyes and drenched her face. She couldn't let Rin see her like this, especially considering all the questions it would bring up to the surface.

Gumi began jogging, knowing that there was no way for Rin to keep up with her. She'd lose her soon enough if she stayed at this speed. In a couple minutes, she'd be able to hide away in her room, far away from Rin and Len.

Gumi let out a startled exclamation and her face hit the ground as Rin plowed her over. Gumi was caught completely off guard and rolled instinctively, taking Rin with her. However, in rolling, they found themselves off the pavement of the sidewalk and down the hill leading into their favourite meadow. They broke apart for a little, Rin rolling ahead of Gumi, until they reached the bottom, when Gumi landed right on top of Rin. Gumi tensed up for a second, but then two girls exploded in laughter, unable to control themselves. Gumi's hair brushed against Rin's face as the green-haired girl threw her head back in laughter. Rin's breath ruffled the falling locks as Gumi looked down on her, their laughter fizzling away.

They stared at each other for a moment. Gumi couldn't move, as captivated as she was by Rin's eyes. Gumi had the other girl pinned down, and Rin seemed too distracted to consider moving. Gumi considered how easy it would be to tell Rin right now, how perfect it was. She'd tell Rin, and then she'd lean down and kiss the girl. Then, Rin could wrap her arms around Gumi's neck, then pull herself up and kiss her back. That is, if Rin felt the same way.

Dread weighed down on Gumi's heart. But how could Rin feel the same way, especially with Len around?

Gumi leaped to her feet and started brushing grass off herself, pain spiking in her chest. When she noticed Rin still lying there, she offered her a hand, which Rin quickly accepted. Rin's hand was tiny, soft, and slender in comparison to Gumi's calloused hands. Her fingernails were painted a beautiful, sparkling sunshine yellow that mimicked the blonde of her hair. Gumi gazed at them for a moment, holding onto Rin's hand even though the other girl was now standing. Rin never wore nail polish before. Gumi would have noticed. Rin's eyes drifted to where Gumi was staring and grew a little tense.

"Why'd you paint your nails?" Gumi wondered, the barest hint of an accusation making its way into her voice.

Rin pulled her hand away and stared at it. Gumi knew immediately what the reason was, but she needed to hear it from Rin. "I just felt like it," the girl replied.

Gumi frowned, the girl's evasiveness only making her more suspicious. "So why yellow? For your hair?" Rin opened her mouth to respond, but Gumi cut her off. "Or for his?"

Rin's mouth shut immediately and her eyes glued themselves onto her feet, redness steadily colouring her face. Gumi couldn't help herself as jealousy consumed her. "Goodbye, Rin," she said icily before around and jogging up the hill.

Rin didn't even try to stop her this time.

. . .

"Gumigumigumigumigumigumigumi!"

Gumi cringed and held the phone away from her ear. Miku's hyperactive shouting was *not* what she needed right now. The girl's high-pitched voice

was giving Gumi a migraine, and she couldn't get a word in between Miku's short breaths. However, it wasn't like she was all that eager to talk to Miku. She didn't have the patience to deal with Miku's newest fling. After her experience with Len today, and what happened with Rin, she wouldn't be in the mood to discuss such things for a while.

Gumi sighed and placed the phone on her bed, waiting for Miku to unwind. She thought of Rin, regretting her earlier actions. Things had been so perfect. It had been the perfect scenery, the perfect time for Gumi to confess her feelings. But she'd gone and screwed it up. All because she couldn't get past Len.

But how was she expected to when he was showing up everywhere?

"Gumi? Helloooooo?"

Gumi stared at the phone, exasperated, and placed it back against her ear. "Hi, Miku."

"Geez, Gumi, I was thinking you'd, like, pocket-answered or something. Say hello when you pick up," ordered Miku.

"Well I would if you weren't already talking when I answered," said Gumi irritably.

Miku was silent for a moment before she continued babbling. "I'm gonna ignore your grumpiness for now." Gumi glared at the phone. *Don't say anything when you notice someone is in a bad mood, idiot*, Gumi thought as she gazed witheringly at the phone. "Anyway, I wanted to talk about the amazingness that is Len."

Gumi, sitting cross-legged on her bed, resisted the urge to throw the phone across the room and decided instead to slam it into her pillow and fall back onto the bed. He was *everywhere*.

"Look, Miku, I really don't want to talk about this," sighed Gumi, retrieving the phone.

Miku wouldn't hear for it and pushed onward. "Come on, Gumi, I just wanna talk about the guy I like. Stop being such a party-pooper."

Gumi's grip on the phone tightened as tension rose in her body. "Miku, I don't want to talk about him, okay?"

Gumi was certain Miku was rolling her eyes right now. "Oh my *God*, Gumi! Stop being such a buzz kill! He's just a guy!"

Gumi closed her eyes and recalled her experience with Len, when she'd been too weak to refuse anything he said. It made her shudder to imagine what kind of affect he'd have on Miku, who was loose enough already. "Miku, you don't know him."

Miku laughed and remarked in a playful attempt to lighten the mood, "Yeah, like I know all the others so well."

Gumi looked at her green nails, her mind caught on Rin for a moment. What kind of affect would Len have on Rin? Gumi felt anxiousness rising as she thought of them, in Rin's room, alone, without Gumi there to protect Rin. She had to go to Rin's house and make up with her. She couldn't leave Rin in Len's clutches.

Gumi sat up in bed, restless energy flowing through her as she stared at her bedroom door. She wanted to leave, but she couldn't just abandon Miku in the middle of a conversation. So, she said the first thing that came to mind. "Look, Miku, you don't have to sleep with every guy you see. He's totally into Rin, anyway."

The moment the words came out, Gumi regretted them. Miku constantly bragged about all the guys she'd slept with, but she'd always been really sensitive about it if one of her friends mentioned it. The other end of the line was silent for a moment, and Gumi braced herself for a scathing reply. Finally, Miku said, "You don't have to hate him just 'cause he likes Rin."

Relief settled for the briefest moment before Gumi frowned at the phone. "I don't hate him because he likes Rin. I just . . . I don't think you should go

after him. He's dangerous."

"How would you know?" snapped Miku. Before Gumi could chose her next words, Miku continued. "You know what, never mind. This conversation is over. I just wanted to talk about it with you and see how things were going with Rin, but you can't seem to bother being a good friend so I don't see why I should. Until now, I haven't even commented about how little time you're spending with me now that you've got Rin back. Until you can be bothered to make this a two-sided relationship, don't talk to me."

The phone clicked and the line went dead. Gumi sighed and hung up the phone. She didn't even get to retort about how insensitive Miku had been during that, albeit very short, conversation. Not that that was anything new, but still. Gumi dropped the phone on her bed and gazed at her green nail polish. Nothing was going to go right today, huh?

. . .

Rin had been quick to accept Gumi's apology. Well, actually, Gumi hadn't really had the time to apologize. The moment she knocked on the door to Rin's house, Rin had leapt out and hugged Gumi as tightly as she could. Gumi saw that Rin's nails were still painted, but she couldn't find it in herself to argue about it anymore. Rin had led her upstairs, where Len awaited them, and had waited there for a moment before going to get tea. Gumi decided to sit beside Len, refusing to give in to him.

Gumi and Len stared straight forward, refusing to look at one another while Rin was gone. Gumi had been expecting Len to make a move on her the moment Rin left, and she couldn't help feeling slightly dejected when he didn't.

Instead, he stated in the silence, "You made her cry."

Gumi had expected as much. Rin had always been sort of a crybaby, and, even if not, for Gumi to do something like that so soon after they'd reconciled would have killed Rin. The other girl was probably afraid that

their friendship would be ruined again. Still, Gumi couldn't manage to say anything beyond, "I know."

Gumi could feel Len's annoyance at her response. He turned to her, and she turned to him, losing herself for a second in his blue eyes before forcing herself out of the trance they placed her in. "If you really care about her, you should leave her alone before you hurt her even more," he informed her, a challenge in his gaze.

Gumi shook her head at him. "I'm not going to leave her again," she replied firmly. She stared him straight in the eye, swaying a little from their intoxicating effect. "Especially not with you around."

Len's gaze grew darker, anger flickering in the blue depths at the accusation behind her words. "I'll take care of her. She can have everything she ever wanted with me."

Gumi resisted the urge to agree with him, knowing it was just his powerful charisma trying to work its words out of her mouth. She told him truthfully, "She can never have everything if she's with you."

Len frowned, displeased with her answer, and he even appeared to be genuinely confused. "Why not?"

Gumi smiled a little when she spoke next. "Because she wants me. And whether it's as a friend or something more, I know that she wants me."

Len was silent for a second. "She may want you, but she can't live without me." He said the words with absolute certainty, making it near impossible to argue with him since almost the whole of her being told her just to agree with him. This was Rin. She couldn't give in. She had to stand her ground. Rin had done fine before Len came around: she could be like that again, if given the chance.

"She could if you were gone," replied Gumi.

Len stared at her for a moment, unsure what to say. Finally, he told her, "I won't leave without her."

Gumi turned away from him, staring at the vanity that stood on the opposite wall. She and Len stared at their reflections, gazing at each other in their peripheral vision. "Then you'll have to take me, too," said Gumi.

Len stared at himself in the mirror and acknowledged quietly, "I just may."

Author's Note: I know, I know. I'm such a liar. I said I wouldn't post as often now that school has started, but, honestly, I spend all day in class thinking about the reviews I'll get to read when I get home. So please review! And, on a another note, school was a bit better today for anyone who actually reads these author notes... Well, I know Campanella does, so hiya! I'm going to try to update every weekday, so look forward to a new chapter after school, people!

11. And So

Chapter Eleven

And So

As Rin had feared, Gumi and Len did *not* seem to get along at all. They'd spend all their time together having calm arguments or glaring at each other or fighting over who got to sit next to Rin. Rin had no idea how Miki dealt with this every day. Well, then again, Miki's situation was different than Rin's if Rin had understood the explanation properly. Gumi and Len hated each other, unlike Piko and Iroha, who just loved to hate each other. Then again, Rin would get way too jealous if Gumi and Len liked each other, so maybe it was for the best that things were like this. Rin stared at the calmly-arguing Gumi and Len across the gathering of desks in class 2-C's classroom, pondering this. Then, Iroha snapped Rin out of her thoughts.

"Okay, everyone, I know this is abrupt, but it's time for us to decide on our pairings for the courage test, meow!" declared Iroha as she jumped out of her seat. The girl had recently started adding the word 'meow' to the ends of her sentences, which Rin found a little endearing.

"What courage test?" wondered Miku, pouting childishly at Iroha like she had all lunch since Iroha had taken the seat beside Len.

"For Halloween, stupid," said Iroha, rolling her eyes at Miku. Miku cast her a withering look. "I found this *awesome* haunted house that we can all go to, but we have to go in pairs, meow!"

"Then I get Miki!" announced Piko.

"Okay, meow," chirped Iroha.

Miki, Piko, and Rin froze. In normal circumstances, a full-out battle would have taken place between Iroha and Piko over who got to be partnered with Miki. But Iroha had just accepted it like it was no big deal. She didn't even care about being paired with Miki. Miki and Piko were seriously ticked off.

"I'm gonna be with Len, meow," announced Iroha, grabbing onto Len's arm and cuddling against him.

Rin felt herself grow jealous at the sight. Len gazed at the blonde girl and smiled, causing Rin to look away to avoid blushing. She stared at Gumi, who sat on the other side of Len, while Len leaned closer to the green-haired girl and murmured something in her ear, smiling seductively. Gumi's cheeks reddened and she leaped out of her seat, glaring at him and trembling a little. Miku stared at the green-haired girl with sheer annoyance and headed over to take the emptied seat. When she did, she looped her arm around Len's neck, who grinned at her, and smiled at him.

"No way, little girl," she purred. "I'm going to be Len's partner."

"But you and Gumi are always partners," whined Iroha, unaware of the affect the words would have on Miku and Gumi.

Gumi stiffened and stared at Miku. Miku grew equally as stiff and untangled herself from Len. She stared at Gumi for a second, and everyone stared at her fearfully. After what seemed like an eternity, Miku spoke.

"If I have to be paired with her, I'm not going," the teal-haired girl said coolly.

They all watched as Miku walked past Gumi without another glance and exited the room. Everyone stared at the door for a while before finally returning to the previous conversation.

"So, are we all happy with our pairings?" asked Iroha. Gumi and Rin stared at each other and smiled, though Rin could feel Len's gaze on her. However, Rin was still afraid of losing Gumi, even if they'd been friends again for nearly a month now, so she didn't want to argue over being Len's partner. And, even worse, she wasn't sure which of the two she wanted to be paired with.

Luckily, Piko and Miki made it so she didn't have to argue.

"No," the two students with cowlicks stated.

Iroha turned away from Len for a moment to frown at them. "What do you mean? Piko, you should be happy. You get Miki for once."

"I think we should have the teams randomly selected," said Miki. "It's more fun that way, right? Anyway, I'm sure Miku wants to come, too. And then Gakupo and Luka will want to come."

"Actually, Luka goes to a giant upperclass party every Halloween, so she won't be joining us," supplied Gumi.

"Great, then we'd have perfect teams," said Miki. "How about it?"

Iroha frowned. "But I wanted to be with Len."

"It's alright, my white strawberry," Len said to Iroha. She turned her gaze toward him, eager to soak in his words. He stroked her face gently and murmured, "We can see each other another time if the fates are against us today."

Iroha nodded eagerly, and Rin felt jealousy consuming her as she watched them. She was in such a daze that she jumped when she felt a nudge at her side. She looked up at Gumi, who stood beside her.

"Can I share?" she requested. "Too much PDA over there."

Rin's heart sped up. She nodded, not trusting her voice, and moved over to make room for Gumi on the chair. They were so close; Rin wasn't sure her heart could handle it. She could feel Gumi's breathing as they turned back to the table. Iroha was still literally all over Len—she was sitting on his lap, her arms wrapped around his chest. Still, Len didn't seem very interested in her. He stared at Rin and Gumi, making Rin feel immediately guilty. She hadn't invited Len to sleep with her since Gumi came back into her life, and she knew it was hurting him, but she couldn't do it when she was so torn between her friendship with Gumi and her relationship with Len.

Rin almost jumped as Gumi laced their fingers together. She looked at Gumi, who smiled shyly at her. Rin almost laughed at the odd face and cracked a smile instead.

"Okay, we're ready!" announced Miki, who had gone off with Piko at some point. She held out a hat. "Pick your pieces. You're paired with the person who picks the same colour."

"This is gonna be interesting," muttered Gumi.

. . .

"Okay, who's first?" questioned Gumi as they stood in front of the haunted house a few nights later.

"I wanted to be with Len," whined Iroha for the umpteenth time that night. Her partner, Miku, swatted her over the back of the head. "Ow!"

"Shut up," growled Miku. "You're not the only one who wanted to be with Len. Anyway, I doubt he has any interest in a child."

"I'm the same age as you, meow!" exclaimed Iroha.

Miku stared at her. "Yeah, like anyone will believe you. Are you *trying* to get my beloved Len put in jail?"

Rin sighed and thought to herself, *I don't think you have anything to worry about in that area*. She gazed over to Len, who shrugged at her and smirked.

"Miku, play nice," commanded Gumi.

Miku stared at Gumi, anger flashing in her gaze. Then, without a single word to Gumi, she grabbed Iroha's hand and tugged the girl into the haunted house. "Come on, shorty, let's get out of here."

"Meow, stop it!" whined Iroha, tumbling forward with Miku until they were completely submerged in darkness. The group watched them go before

turning back to themselves.

"So, who next?" wondered Miki.

"Why don't you and Rin go?" questioned Piko.

Rin jumped at the sound of her name. She'd been distracted by the ghoulish noises and constant screams inside the haunted house. She shivered as she imagined what was going on inside the dark barn. She gripped tightly onto Miki's arm, staring in horror at the shadowy entrance into the terrifying building. Even the entrance was decorated to scare people. It looked like a cave, haunting music echoed against the walls, and someone in a grey cloak with ghastly makeup on stood there, awaiting their entrance.

"Sure, we'll go," said Miki, placing a comforting hand on Rin's hand that was gripping Miki's arm. "Okay, Rin?"

Rin tried to speak, but it came out as nothing but a stutter, so she opted to nod instead.

"Will you be okay, Rin?" asked Gumi worriedly, knowing that Rin was a total fraidy cat. Rin met Gumi's concerned gaze and felt herself grow self-conscious of her childishness.

Rin released Miki's arm, fighting down her nervousness as best as she could, and said in a voice that she hoped sounded confident, "Of course I will! Don't worry about me!"

Gumi and Len both laughed a little, unable to resist, and then glared at each other, stopping themselves abruptly. Rin stared at them. She was more concerned about those two than she was about herself.

Rin clung to Miki as they entered the cave-entrance. Miki patted her hand comfortingly, but that didn't stop Rin from shrieking as the grey-clad being moved to pull the curtain aside and let them proceed. Even he laughed at her then. Embarrassment reddened her face. Maybe she really was the one to be more worried about.

. . .

"I'm sorry," Rin said miserably, again, to Miki as they accepted two cups of hot chocolate from the cashier at the stand next to the haunted house.

"Don't worry about it, Rin," repeated Miki. "Haunted houses don't entertain me that much anyway. I just do it for Iroha."

"I'm still sorry," sighed Rin, her head bowed in embarrassment.

Miki and Rin hadn't even made it through the first of five sections in the winding haunted house. Rin had been terrified by absolutely everything she saw and had lost the bravery she'd attempted to muster up for Gumi. Instead, she'd waited for the two other pairs behind her and Miki to pass; then, Miki and Rin had gone backwards through the haunted house and exited through the entrance. They'd been scolded by the grey-clad person at the entrance, but it had seemed half-hearted after he'd seen how incredibly pale Rin's face was. After he'd gone through the motions, he'd released them. Rin felt horrible for making Miki miss out, though.

Rin sipped on her hot chocolate and stared at Miki, who was staring curiously at Rin's head. Rin stared at her in confusion, and Miki asked, "Where's your bow?"

Rin's heart stopped. The hot chocolate dropped out of her hands, splashing the ground beneath her as her hands flew to her head, feeling for the omnipresent white bow. All she felt was her hair. "No, no, no!" she shouted, still scrambling through her hair in hopes that her bow would show up. "Where is it? I had it when I came here!"

"Do you think you lost it in the haunted house?" wondered Miki.

Rin froze. Her heart was racing a mile a minute as she responded, "Maybe."

"Then let's go look," said Miki.

. . .

Rin didn't think about all the terrifying things behind the curtain as she pushed through without a word to the grey-clad person. Miki followed swiftly behind as they moved through the tunnel, reaching for anything that looked white. Rin didn't even care when she grabbed a skeleton's leg, neither did she squeal at the way the eyeballs she grabbed out of a bowl squished in her hand. She ignored the people who jumped out at her and even pushed one aside to gaze inside a coffin to see if she'd somehow dropped the bow in there.

Rin let out a hiss of irritation when all the lights flickered out. All the ghoulish music and fake screams were met with confused murmuring from the workers and a few shrieks far away in the barn. Rin tried to continue searching, but she crashed into something every way she went, until finally Miki grabbed her and pulled her into a sitting position on the ground. Rin's eyes couldn't adjust enough to see Miki, but there was no light anyway, not the faintest trickle. They listened as two workers in the area spoke to each other, obviously both in the dark—no pun intended—themselves.

"Are you gonna be okay, Rin?" Miki asked.

But Rin was beginning to hyperventilate and tears choked her, so she could barely make out, "I need the bow."

Miki must have been concerned about the darkness when she'd asked her question because confusion tinted her voice. "Oh. What's so important about the bow, Rin? Can't you get a new one?"

Rin shook her head, even though Miki couldn't see if, and felt Miki's presence calming her enough to make her breathing more steady. "Gumi gave it to me a couple years ago. I always wear it because she gave it to me."

Miki seemed to see an opportunity here. "Why is she so special that you have to wear it every day?" prodded Miki in the darkness. "You don't wear anything I've gotten you every day."

Rin's swallowed and said tentatively, "Because it's different."

"How so?" questioned Miki.

Rin felt heat in her face, and she was only able to mumble when she replied, "Because it's a promise."

"What kind of promise?"

Rin was quiet for a second, and, though she could sense that the workers nearby were listening to her eagerly, she replied, "It's a promise to be with her forever, in whatever way she wants." Rin smiled sadly. "Even if that means that I'll never be able to be with her the way I want to. Just being with her is enough for me."

Miki was quiet for a second, and the anticipation coming from the workers was almost tangible. "And if you can't find the bow?"

Rin's next words filled her heart with anguish. "Then it's a sign that we aren't meant to be."

Author's Note: Honestly, that pun was completely unintended. I didn't realize it until I edited. And now, I must say, I LOVE YOU ALL! Honestly, you're the best readers/reviewers a writer can ask for! And, don't worry, I won't push myself too hard. I'll probably write all the chapters in one day when the inspiration bunnies come and I'll have enough to last me all week. My writing from the last batch of bunnies has just run out so I'm gonna write all day on Saturday, just 'cause I can. So, review please people! Oh, and I hope those of you who're having a rough time at school like me are doing a little better today 3 Oh, and I'm sorry that it's celebrating Halloween already in this story, but the stuff is in stores so why not?

12. Please Stay by My Side: 2

Chapter Twelve

Please Stay by My Side

"Stop that!" Gumi snapped, slapping Len's hand away as he reached out to touch her somewhere she was certain would be inappropriate.

But Len just smirked at her. "No need to play hard to get, Gumi. There's no one else here."

Gumi's eyebrow twitched in irritation, and she refused to look at Len and focused instead on the spider webs dangling in front of herself that she had to push through to continue onward in the haunted house. "I'm *not* playing hard-to-get. I don't want anything to do with you."

"Is that so?" wondered Len, following her through a darkened hallway. Gumi's hand ran along the wall to stop herself from getting lost, but it fell through a hole in the wall that caused a siren and blaring red lights to circulate. She winced and quickly drew back her hand, bringing an end to the startling noise.

"Of course," she replied promptly, sensing Len's leering eyes behind her lingering lower down than she would like. She instantly wished she'd thought to wear something baggier than the tight-fitting vintage jeans and small black spaghetti-strap top she'd decided on. She narrowed her eyes. Then again, Len was such a pervert, even *that* would probably turn him on.

She gasped as he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her backward with a strong tug. She ended up with her back against the wall as he put a hand on either side of her head against the wall. Her heart sped up and heat burned in her cheeks as he gave her his signature smile in the dim light. "Even now, you want nothing to do with me?"

Gumi shuddered and forced her eyes shut to avoid being trapped in Len's gaze. She thought of Rin and only Rin to manage to get her next words out

without them being a complete lie. "Yes, I want nothing to do with you."

"And now?" he whispered. Gumi kept her eyes shut, but she could feel Len looming in closer, and his breath rustled the strands of hair that had fallen in front of her face.

Gumi knew she wouldn't be able to hold out much longer in such a position, so she ducked under his arm and escaped the confinement. She opened her eyes and moved briskly into the fourth section of the haunted house. She was immediately jumped by two actors, which would have frightened her a few moments earlier, but not now. So, she ignored them and continued on as Len followed behind.

"Come on, Gumi, you knew we'd be paired up," insisted Len. "Why else would you have worn such a skimpy outfit?"

Gumi wouldn't turn to face him as she replied. "For your information, I always dress this way when I'm not in school. If I'm gonna do all that exercise I might as well show off what I've got."

"My, my, my. And here I thought you were completely loyal to Rin."

Gumi raised her eyebrows at the comment, not that Len would see the expression. "You're the last person I should be hearing that from, or have you forgotten that you're cheating on Rin with almost every girl you lay eyes on? Miki's the only one you've left untouched." She couldn't help but grow defensive as she added, "Besides, all girls like to be looked at. I do it with my slender figure, Rin does it with her natural cuteness. Why else would she wear that childish bow every day?" She sniffed for added effect.

Len's answer seemed unusual for him. "I never thought you were such an idiot, Gumi. She wears it because you gave it to her." She was about to turn with him in shock when he added, "It was a gift from her *best friend*, nothing more than that."

Gumi growled in frustration, glad she hadn't turned around, and muttered, "Idiot."

"And, as for Miki, she's more fun to watch squirm as I steal Iroha away." He paused for a second. "For now, at least."

Gumi spun around to face him, not believing her ears. Flames shone in her green eyes as she shouted, "You sicko! What the hell is wrong with you?" Then, she turned back around and raced forward, never seeing Len's reaction and ignoring all the ornaments around her as the actors barely got a chance to start their lines.

Stupid Len. Why did *she* have to get paired with him? Sure, it was better she be paired with him than Rin, but why couldn't he have just been paired with Piko or Gakupo so he wouldn't be a threat to the girls? Gumi plowed into the fifth section of the haunted house, greeted immediately by a robotic, puking clown. She stared at in disgust and made a move to go forward.

Then, the power went out.

. . .

Darkness fell instantaneously, and all noises stopped. Gumi's heart stuttered to a halt as fear swallowed it whole. She froze, unable to move, as she whipped her head around rapidly to find any source of light.

There was no light, no light anywhere. There was darkness all around her, and not a speck of light. And no one was around, not even Len, who she'd lost back in the forth section of the barn. There were no workers in this area, only electronic figures that were now lifeless. Gumi fell to her knees, her breathing growing unsteady.

Was that a clicking she heard? Was there something moving nearby? Was something coming to grab her while she sat here, defenceless, in the dark?

Why wasn't there any light? Surely they should have had emergency lights or something. Gumi's eyes stayed wide open as she drew her arms over her head and drew her head down, closer to her knees on the floor. There was

darkness everywhere, no way to see what was coming after her, no way at all to defend herself when it did.

It was so dark.

Gumi's breathing was ragged and her chest started to hurt as tears pooled in her wide-open eyes, dripping down down onto the floor, masking the sound of the clicking she knew she heard somewhere nearby.

Click click click. It was there, she was certain. It was coming for her, and it would get her soon, where no one would see her, no one at all, and no one could come to help her. Gumi struggled to catch her breath, but it wasn't helped when she felt a scream rip from her mouth for many excruciatingly long seconds. Click click click. She wasn't the only one who heard it, right? The clicking was there, drawing closer and closer.

She screamed again as it grabbed her by the shoulder. She clawed at it, screeching words she wasn't even certain were Japanese. But it wouldn't let her go, and her head was dizzy from her laboured breathing. She clawed as much as she could, but it wouldn't let go, and her breathing was growing rougher and rougher and the tears kept falling and falling and her head felt lighter and lighter and she couldn't breathe, could breathe, and she was falling, falling, and the darkness was replaced with a new kind of black as she fell away.

. . .

The dark was back again, the old black, the black where the clicking waited. Gumi jerked up quickly and instantly felt hands on her. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't remember how. Terror was all she could remember, and terror and the instinct to run away.

"Gumi."

The voice. Whose was it? It was comfortable, comforting in Gumi's ears.

"It's okay, Gumi. They said the power should be back in an hour, but we're not allowed to move until then. We have a flashlight. Do you want us to turn it on?"

Flashlight? Yes, on. Turn it on. But how do you say that? Gumi couldn't remember.

"I'm going to turn it on, okay? Then the dark will be gone."

Yes, yes, take it away. Make it go away. Then the clicking will go away, too. Wait a second, where was the clicking? Oh, there it was. Gumi could still hear it, lingering nearby. Waiting for the voice to leave so it could grab Gumi again.

The clicking fled as light poured out from a tiny source. From there, the first thing Gumi saw was Len, leaning against a coffin on the wall, staring at her with an unreadable expression. Beside him stood Iroha, clinging to his arm but more focused on Gumi than the boy for the first time ever. Then, the hands that held both Gumi and the light were Miku's, staring at Gumi with an unusual expression. Anger still lingered there, but concern melded overtop of it, and at the same time jealousy sprinkled the top.

"Miku," murmured Gumi, though she swept her eyes around for the clicking before focusing on the teal-eyed girl.

"I heard you screaming, so I came back to find you," said Miku. "I remembered how you were on that field trip when I tried to turn off the lights in the hotel. You had to leave on at least one light. I didn't call you out on it then because I knew it embarrassed you, but you're afraid of the dark, right?"

Gumi nodded and said slowly, "The clicking comes when it's dark and won't go away. I keeps it's distance when there are people nearby, but it's still there."

"What clicking?" piped up Iroha, thoroughly and curiously confused.

Gumi turned her head to her, still in a sort of daze as she continued to speak. "It's a clicking that comes to get me when it's dark. It grabbed me today."

Then Len spoke up. "That would have been me, Gumi dearest. I came to find you, but when I tried to talk you ignored me, so I tried to grab your shoulder and then you went ballistic on me. And then you fainted."

"I'm sorry," Gumi said instinctively, still too numb to fully realize what she was saying. "I did that to Rin once, too."

Len, shocked by the apology, said nothing more. Instead, they all slid into silence for the next hour.

. . .

"Gumi, oh my God, are you alright?" Rin exclaimed when Gumi and the others exited the haunted house. Gumi was no longer visibly distraught and had her usual relaxed face on. Still, Rin was completely anxious when she ran over and hugged Gumi. Gumi relaxed in her friend's arms and hugged her back. "I wanted to go looking for you, but you were too far ahead!"

"I'm okay, Miku helped me," said Gumi. Len snorted, so Gumi glared at him. "Shut it. I wouldn't have been alone if you had been so . . . so . . . *you* earlier!"

"What happened?" questioned Gakupo as he and Piko exited the haunted house.

"I'll explain later," said Iroha as she made her way over to stand beside Miki. "Miki, want a hot chocolate?"

"I've already got one," said Miki, bringing attention the Styrofoam cup in her hand. Piko and Iroha stood on either side of her and stared at it.

"When did you get that?" asked Piko.

Miki shrugged and smiled at Rin as Gumi and Rin separated. Gumi stared at the top of Rin's head, noticing the absence of the bow, as Miki spoke. "A cute boy gave it to me."

"Meow, what are you talking about?" exclaimed Iroha. "No boy can give hot chocolate to my Miki!"

"She's not yours!" argued Piko. "And *I'm* a boy!"

"I know that," responded Iroha.

"Hey!" shouted Piko.

"Hey, blonde girl!"

Everyone turned to the unfamiliar voice. One of the workers from inside the haunted house exited from the entrance and ran up to Rin. He held something out to her. Everyone stared at the hand as the young man gasped for breath. "We found the bow! It's a sign, right?"

Rin looked shocked for a moment, but then she took the bow from him and smiled brightly. "You're right. Thank you very much."

The young man seemed pleased with this answer, even if everyone else was confused. He turned to Gumi and questioned, "Are you Gumi?" Gumi nodded hesitantly. The young man gave her a bright smile and a thumbs up. "Well then best of luck to the two of you! I'm sure you have a great future ahead of you!"

Gumi stared at him in confusion and managed a hesitant, "Thank . . . you?"

The young man nodded, quite pleased with himself, waved farewell to Rin and Miki, and then dashed off into the building. Gumi turned to Rin, a question on her face. Miki giggled as Rin's face proceeded to redden.

Author's Note: Sorry this is late, I had no Internet yesterday. And "the clicking" will be explained in a later chapter. Anyway, I wanted to end

this dramatic chapter on a happy note, thus the random worker guy. I actually meet those kinds of people in real life. So, yeah, I'll see you all again on Monday! Oh, and did anyone notice Iroha in the end? It's important, people! I actually have many references as early as the chapter Len gets introduced (I forget which one that was) that will return later on. I plan the whole thing out so that I can do that. The only parts I knew when I started writing were Len's whole story, the ending, and a certain Rin and Gumi moment that won't come for a few chapters. But now I know basically everything. Except Miku She's a mystery to me. She's just here when I need her (which is why it was her and not Len in that moment. I had originally planned on using Len but I thought it was too romantic.) Okay, yeah, sorry, I'm on a caffeine high so I wanted to type a long author's note. Oh, and I know I already used this title, but I didn't expect this story to go as long as I now have planned so I'm gonna end up reusing some titles So, review, s'il-vous-plaît!

13. The More I Know You, the More I Don't

Chapter Thirteen

The More I Know You, the More I Don't Know You

Rin accepted a new hot chocolate from Miki as she and Piko passed hot chocolates to all the members of their group. Len, oddly enough, accepted his from Piko instead of Miki. Rin found this peculiar as he rarely acknowledged the presence of other males. Meanwhile, Iroha refused a hot chocolate from Piko and the two started arguing until Miki stepped between the two and handed a hot chocolate to each. They both beamed at her and then argued over who would get to hold her free hand.

Rin found herself completely absorbed in Len. The boy stood a little away from the group, not participating in conversation or listening to any of the discussions coming from the different divisions in the group. His emotions were completely unreadable, which only worried Rin more. He'd been like this since they'd exited the haunted house. Maybe it was seeing Rin hug Gumi like that that had ticked him off. But he'd seemed like this even before that had happened, so it must have been something else.

"So, where to next?" questioned Gakupo.

Rin couldn't look at the purple-haired boy. She was still too embarrassed from when he'd asked her out to even make eye-contact with him without her face going an incredibly bright red. Not to mention it still made her feel guilty, especially since she could still feel him staring at her sometimes.

"I vote for the wagon ride, meow!" announced Iroha.

"Well, if Iroha says it, we really have no other option," said Miku with a smile.

Iroha nodded. "Yep, exactly."

Miku rolled her eyes and turned to Gumi. "You gonna be okay?" There was the faintest trace of concern in her voice. She seemed to be attempting to be casual to avoid embarrassing Gumi. Rin felt a little jealous that Miku knew Gumi so well, but her mind was so preoccupied by Len that it didn't last very long.

"I'll be fine," replied Gumi, narrowing her eyes at Miku.

Miku raised her hands in surrender. "Just checkin'."

"I'm gonna sit beside Miki, meow!" announced Iroha.

"I get the other side!" announced Piko.

"What if she sits in a corner?" teased Gumi.

Iroha and Piko stared at Gumi, then they jumped to turn and glare at each other. The arguing between the two intensified. Miki giggled as she watched them; Rin prepared herself to pull the two apart if their arguing got too bad.

The battling stopped abruptly when the two students accidentally broke their Styrofoam cups in perfect sync, causing hot chocolate to spill all over the ground. As the crowd laughed, Iroha stared at the spilled hot chocolate and her eyes grew teary at the loss, so Rin decided that the best thing to do was to give her hot chocolate to Iroha. Iroha smiled brightly at her and gave Rin a large hug. Rin laughed and accepted.

When Iroha and Rin broke apart, Rin was instantly offered a hot chocolate by both Gumi and Len. Sparks of competitiveness flew between Gumi and Len as they glared at each other, waiting to see whose hot chocolate Rin would pick. Rin opted out of choosing one by refusing either. Gumi and Len were evidently dissatisfied with this response and returned to their earlier positions. Rin sighed and watched the two of them, wondering if she'd ever be able to choose one over the other.

. . .

"Okay, Mr. Scary Guy, move aside, meow!" ordered Iroha as a man cloaked in black opened the door into the wagon for the group to enter. Iroha entered proudly and took a seat in the front right corner. "C'mon, Miki!"

Miki laughed and followed Iroha, taking the seat beside her. Piko then took the next seat. Gakupo sat in the back left corner. Miku and Gumi sat across from him as the three discussed something about Luka that left Rin feeling a little out of the loop. Len had taken a seat in the isolated left front corner. He gazed out at the forest, ignoring everyone around him. Rin couldn't help but be concerned.

Rin's eyes flicked to Gumi, who was smiling and conversing with Gakupo and Miku. She seemed happy, so surely she wouldn't mind

Rin took a seat by Len, who looked at her, a little startled. His gaze turned to Gumi for a second before returning to Rin. She smiled delicately at him and took his hand, feeling that he could use her closeness right now. He glanced at their hands and then smiled at her. She squeezed his hand and then gazed at his bare arms.

The insides of his arms were laced with tattoos, tiny little symbols, about three squared centimetres each. Rin had noticed these before, but he'd never answered her when she'd asked him about it. So, she'd respectfully let him alone about it, even if the curiosity was killing her. He noticed her staring and stared at her, his eyes revealing nothing as he watched her expression for any sign of understanding.

"Are we gonna get moving or what?" snapped Iroha, pouting sourly at their black-clad host. He stared at her, annoyed.

"We have to wait for the wagon to fill up," he replied.

"But Miki wants to go, meow!" said Iroha. She turned to the girl beside her. "Right, Miki?"

Miki smiled at her. "Of course."

Iroha turned back to the man. "You see, meow? You can't keep Miki waiting, Mr. Scary Guy!"

"Now, now, Iroha," scolded Miku. "Don't harass the attractive man." She smiled flirtatiously at the worker, who ignored her for the most part.

"Yeah, he might throw you off while we're moving," laughed Gumi.

"Then I'll take Piko down with me, meow!" announced Iroha.

"Hey!" cried Piko. "No way am I gonna let you take me down!"

Iroha ignored him and turned to their guide. "Mr. Scary Guy, can you throw him off the wagon and feed him to zombies or something, meow?"

The worker blinked at her, overwhelmed by the team's energy. "No, but I may throw you off sometime soon."

Iroha narrowed her eyes at him and grabbed onto Miki's arm. Miki laughed as Iroha turned to her and, staring at the man, said, "This guy is mean, meow. Be careful."

"What's on your arm, Len?"

Everyone turned to the speaker, Gumi, who was staring discontentedly to where Rin and Len sat. Rin quickly released Len's hand as the eyes turned to them. Len seemed too concentrated on Gumi to notice.

"They're tattoos," he replied innocently.

"Tattoos?" said Gakupo in shock. "Aren't those against school rules?"

Len didn't even bother to face Gakupo when he answered. He and Gumi were too busy staring off. Rin's anxiety returned as tension thickened the air around the group. "Of course they are," he said promptly.

"Then how did you manage to get into our school?" questioned Miki curiously. "Normally they're quite meticulous and wouldn't look over such a

large detail."

"I have my ways," said Len.

"How?" questioned Gumi.

Len shot her a glare for such a short moment that Rin wasn't even sure she'd seen it right. The others hadn't seemed to notice, so maybe she'd just been fooling herself.

"Well, Gumi," said Len stiffly, "some things are just better left unsaid."

"But we all want to know," pushed Gumi.

"Well I don't feel like sharing," Len retorted.

"Len," said Rin carefully, seeing that this was the perfect opportunity. Len turned to her, a little startled. Hesitantly, she ventured, "I'd like to know."

Len stared at her for a moment, then he sighed. Finally, he responded, "I bribed the school's director."

"Len's a bad boy, meow!" cried Iroha, widening her eyes at him.

Len closed his eyes and his eyebrow twitched in irritation. Rin immediately regretted pushing him to answer. As an apology, she took his hand again and squeezed it to try to tell him that she was sorry. He squeezed in response, accepting.

"Are you rich or something?" questioned Miku. She swiftly added with a seductive smile, "'Cause that's hot."

Gumi smacked Miku across the back of the head and asked another question of her own. "So what're the tattoos?"

Len scowled at her. "I don't see why I have to answer that."

Gumi was eager to challenge Len. She leaned toward him, smiling politely, though malice was evident in her words. "Why, is there something you're hiding?"

Len quickly accepted her challenge and gave the same polite smile. "Not at all." He held out his left arm for everyone to see. All eyes focused on his finger as he pointed to each tattoo, starting at his wrist and moving upward. "There's an indigo sunset, a red lily, a yellow cherry blossom, a green pumpkin, a crimson cactus, a grey daffodil, and a purple fox." Rin watched him eagerly, quite interested by his words. She'd never been able to get Len to talk about his tattoos like he was now. He switched arm and continued. "Then on this arm there's a saffron snowflake, a burgundy sun, a sapphire ribbon, a brown wolf, an aqua fan, and a violet bow." He smiled at Gumi. "Satisfied?"

"Certainly," Gumi said primly. "Though I can't help but notice that all those titles are rather specific."

Rin could feel Len stiffen and tightened her grip on him, afraid he might do something he'd regret. He simply replied, "I'm one for detail."

"Do they have any significance?" Iroha chirped, oblivious to the darkness looming between Len and Gumi.

Len turned to her and smiled. "Of course."

"What exactly?" came Gumi's voice. Len turned his gaze back to her.

"I'd rather not share that," he said tightly.

But Gumi refused to be deterred. "Why not?"

Len pressed a finger to his lips, and all the girls immediately found themselves leaning toward him eagerly, even Rin. "It's a secret."

Before they could speak again, a second group piled onto the wagon.

Author's Note: For those who are wondering, there will be 30 chapters to this story. I sat down and planned the entire thing out (during math class XD). It would be shorter if I were to end it where I had originally planned, so be happy, people. You get a couple extra chapters now. Anyway, let's survive week two of school together!

14. Are You in Love?

Chapter Fourteen

Are You in Love?

"Hello, Hiyama-sensei!" said Miku in a singsong voice as she and Gumi entered class 2-C's room for lunch. Luka and Gakupo followed close behind them, a little unsure of themselves, unlike Miku who seemed to think she owned the entire school.

"Miku?" said Kiyoteru in shock. "What are you doing here?"

Miku winked at him. "I'm joining your class."

Kiyoteru stared at her in disbelief. "Seriously?"

Miku stuck her tongue out at him playfully. "Of course not. We're here for lunch. We always come. You're just running late today."

Kiyoteru looked infinitely grateful and let out a sigh of relief. Miku pouted at him a little and snubbed him for his rudeness. Gumi shared an eye-roll with Luka, amused at Kiyoteru's flustered reaction when Miku had entered the room. The rumours about Miku going after Kiyoteru were definitely true. Not that Gumi had ever really doubted it, but Kiyoteru's reaction had made it all too obvious.

"So, anyway," said Miku, pulling a desk to the cluster Rin's group had formed, "Have you guys heard the latest gossip? No, no, no, Gumi, you sit with me. Bad girl."

Gumi froze. She'd been pulling up a chair beside Rin, but Miku locked their gazes together and pulled a chair up beside herself, staring at Gumi expectantly and decidedly. Gumi sighed and gazed at Rin apologetically before joining Miku. Miku had overlooked their fight after the incident in the haunted house, but Gumi knew that, in return, Miku expected her to behave as a better friend, which Gumi knew she hadn't been doing before.

"Okay, so," continued Miku, returning instantly to her previous thought, "anyone? Anyone heard anything juicy lately?"

Iroha exchanged a look with Rin, who shrugged in return, and then turned to Luka. Luka seemed a little unsure what to do, unused to being the subject of Iroha's wide-eyed gaze. Iroha soon grew bored at Luka's lack of answer and turned to Gakupo, who was more accustomed to her and shook his head.

"I don't believe anyone has heard anything," Miki replied on behalf of the group.

Miku scowled and sighed. "My gosh, you guys are so out of the loop. I need better friends."

"I resent that," said Luka, narrowing her eyes at Miku.

"Whatever," said Miku, waving away the comment. "So, the biggest news is those class 2-B girls, Yowane Haku and Akita Neru."

"Who?" questioned Rin, looking to Gumi for assistance.

But Gumi was too captivated in her own thoughts to notice. She thought of the day she'd caught Len and Neru in the hall, when Len had turned all his attention onto her and tossed her into a state of enchantment, where the only thing in the world was him and he was all that mattered.

"They're these two girls in class 2-B who talk to no-one but each other," replied Luka. "Everyone assumes they're going out."

Len laughed at this. Piko and Gakupo looked at him curiously, but all the girls were completely enraptured by the sound of his voice. Even Gumi found herself eager to soak up his words, despite herself. "This is quite the odd school you have," said Len. "Two girls in a relationship Anywhere else in the world, that in itself would be the juiciest gossip, but you all treat it like it's completely normal."

"Well, actually, I get a lot of grief for loving Miki, meow," commented Iroha a little defensively. "I still get picked on a lot, but Piko always defends me, meow." She smiled at Piko sincerely for what Gumi thought was the first time ever. Piko smiled back at her. "Piko is a good boy."

"And I get scolded for leading her on," said Miki with a smile, obviously not at all bothered by it. "It's just the way things are. I'm sure Neru and Haku deal with it too."

"But they've already kind of locked themselves away from the rest of the school anyway. They don't have to deal with it like I would have to," said Miku.

Gumi watched Rin as they all spoke, thinking of what it would be like at school if she were to confess her feelings for Rin. She knew Rin wouldn't be able to handle all the attention she'd get, whether she turned Gumi down or not. Rin was busy studying her bow, which she'd taken off her head in order to pick off pieces of fluff and cat hairs.

Gumi could sense that Len's words were directed at her when he said, "Still, a relationship between two girls is odd."

"Oh, shut up," snapped Gumi, unable to control herself. Everyone turned to her, though they'd begun to get used to her short temper when Len was involved. "Have an open mind, jerk. Anyway, at least keep your opinions to yourself when you happen to be among girls who love other girls."

The corner of Len's mouth twitched into a smirk. "You say that like there's more than just Iroha who's in love with another girl." Gumi's face flushed red. Darn it. She'd probably given herself away now.

"Hey, Miki loves me too, meow!" exclaimed Iroha.

"I'm pretty sure she meant Luka," said Miku, saving Gumi. Gumi had to admit, Miku was the best friend she could ask for.

"Miku!" shouted Luka, her face red.

Miku dismissed Luka's exclamation with the wave of a hand. "C'mon, Luka, everyone in school *knows* you asked me out."

Luka glared at Miku. "You could be nicer about it," she grumbled.

Miku frowned, a little apologetic. "Sorry, Luka, girls just aren't for me, y'know?"

"Yeah, I know," sighed Luka, though she still glared at Miku. "You said that when you rejected me, remember?"

"So, anyway, people, we've gotten off topic," said Miku. "So, the latest news is that Neru and Haku ran away together."

This pricked Gumi's interest. That had to be the most interesting thing to happen here in a long time. She turned to Miku, eager to hear what else Miku had to say. Miku, satisfied that everyone was paying attention, continued.

"So, get this: Neru and Haku have always been rumoured to be together, right? But, of course, that's gotta be hard for them since they're both girls, right? So, about a week ago, Haku and Neru stopped coming to school. So, one of their classmates went to both of their houses to see what was up, and it turns out Neru and Haku both ran away on the same night! They went to bed at night, but they were gone in the morning, their windows wide open." Her eyes glimmered with excitement. "Awesome, right?"

Len seemed only slightly amused, but everyone else was completely absorbed in the story. Neru and Haku, a modern Romeo and Juliet, tossed into this realm of forbidden desires for each other, had run away together. Well, maybe it was Juliet and Juliet In any case, Gumi hoped they had a happier ending than *that* story.

Gumi peeked at Rin through the hair falling down beside her face. If Haku and Neru could be together like that, maybe she and Rin could do it, too.

. . .

After the discussion at lunch that day, Gumi had come to the conclusion that the time had come for her to do it. Finally, after two years apart and many months beyond that of suppressed feelings, Gumi would finally tell Rin how she felt. Of course, the fear of rejection lingered, but Gumi found herself thinking that the rejection couldn't be that bad, and that she could survive if that happened. Hiding her feelings had to be worse than rejection. After all, even if Rin didn't return her feelings now, maybe she'd come to love Gumi when Gumi's feelings were out in the open.

Anyway, there was only one thing that could be worse than keeping in her feelings, and rejection wasn't it. *He* was.

Len was waiting for Rin outside the choir room. Gumi watched him in disgust. How desperate. It was so obvious. At least Gumi was Rin's best friend, so it wasn't nearly as weird for her to take position beside Len and wait for Rin.

They were both silent as they waited for Rin, and a part of Gumi wished Len would turn to her and start whispering inappropriate suggestions into her ears like he used to at lunch. She hated that part of herself, the part that was as intoxicated by Len as all the other girls, the part she fought against every moment they were together. She longed to grab him and insist he lay claim to her, to say again that he would kiss no one but her.

"Gum-Gum!"

Gumi crashed backward into the wall as Iroha attacked her with a giant hug. The breath was knocked out of her lungs, and Gumi found it hard to believe that someone so small could be so powerful. Iroha looked up to Gumi with sparkling eyes. "I've decided that you're one of my best friends, Gum-Gum, okay? I'm yours too, right?"

Gumi tried to get a grip on what was happening and gazed down on Iroha confusedly. "Um, sure," she replied hesitantly, looking at the other choir club members for help. They stared at her, amused, and offered no aid. Gumi looked back to Iroha and slowly picked her words. "So, um, you're gonna call me Gum-Gum from now on?"

Iroha nodded cheerfully. "Gum-Gum acts so tough that she needs a cute nickname to show her soft side."

Gumi raised her eyebrows at Iroha, who remained oblivious. Gumi was only tough because Len was around, not that Iroha knew that.

"Okay, Iroha, we don't want to miss the bus," said Piko.

Iroha whined, "But Gumi waited for me," but went over to the white-haired boy anyway. Gumi didn't bother letting Iroha know that she'd actually been waiting for Rin. She didn't see what would be gained from making her—apparently—best friend upset.

"Bye, Gumi, Len, Rin," said Miki with a polite little wave before guiding Iroha and Piko down the hallway.

"So, Len, Gum-Gum, shall we go?" giggled Rin.

Gumi glared at her. "Say that again and die," she growled.

. . .

"Rin, I want you to come to my house today," Gumi said when she, Rin, and Len had arrived at Rin's house.

Rin stared at her, confused. "Really?"

Oh my God, she'd adorable even when she's confused. Gumi's cheeks flushed red and she stuttered, "Y-yes. But only you!" She stared at Len pointedly. Rin looked to Len, who was already in the door and glaring at Gumi.

"I'm gonna go, okay, Len?" Rin said tentatively. He looked at her in utter disbelief, not quite believing his ears. "I'll be home later."

Len said nothing to her. Instead, he closed the door decidedly, using more force than necessary. Rin watched the door a little sadly, but she still followed Gumi to her house.

Gumi flinched when she stepped onto her porch. Even before she opened the door, she was assaulted by shouts from inside the house. Gumi sighed. They were at it again, huh? She gazed at Rin apologetically, but Rin understood and took Gumi's hand in her own. Gumi's face flushed, though Rin didn't seem to think anything of it. She was probably used to it after being around Miki so much and saw it as nothing but a sign of friendship. She guided Gumi over to a bench and sat there.

"So, why did you want to go to your house?" asked Rin, leaving out the obvious *considering it's always like this whenever I come*.

"I wanted to get away from Len," replied Gumi. Before Rin could speak again, Gumi locked their gazes and let it show that she was incredibly serious right now. She took a deep breath. "Rin, would you be willing to stay away from Len, forever, if I asked you to?"

Rin was taken aback. She shook her head vigorously and gazed at Gumi as if the other girl had lost her mind.

Gumi felt anguish take over her entire being. It was such a blunt response. So there was no way? No way Rin would ever give up Len and be Gumi's alone? The only thing worse than rejection was this, being told that Len was the one Rin wanted most in her life.

"Are you in love with him?" Gumi questioned, tears springing to her eyes as she waited for Rin's response that never came. Rin stared back at Gumi, at a loss for words, but Gumi could tell what she meant.

It was too much. Gumi jerked off the bench. Tears dropped onto the pavement as she wiped her sleeve under her dripping nose. "Alright then," said Gumi, choking back the worse of the tears. "Never mind. You can go back to Len."

Before Rin could call her back, Gumi ran into her house and slammed the door shut, ignoring all the shouts coming from her parents in the kitchen as she dashed into her room, slammed the door, and sobbed until no more tears would come.

Author's Note: I went from adorable Iroha to that? Geez, this story is depressing, but I love you people for putting up with it. I'm quite pleased with it overall, even if it's, as I said, depressing. I've tried to keep an open mind about Len up until now, but even I'm starting to hate him Sorry, Len, I won't make you the antagonist next time I write about you. So, yeah, three days left this week, yay! Oh, apparently yay isn't a word according to spellcheck. Anyway, I love all you readers and reviewers! Please keep following this story! We're nearly at the halfway point!

15. I'll Probably be Broken by You

Chapter Fifteen

I'll Probably be Broken by You

The door slammed in Rin's face as Gumi bolted into her house. Rin stared at it, completely lost. Why was Gumi being so strange today? First, she forced Rin to come to her house, even though Rin had never even entered Gumi's house before due to the constant battles inside, whether it was between Gumi's parents or one of the parents and Gumi's older brother. Then, she asked her something as *absurd* as staying away from Len, even though Gumi *knew* Len was incredibly important to Rin, just as important as Gumi was.

Rin froze at that thought. Len was just as important as Gumi?

Are you in love with him?

Gumi's words echoed in Rin's ears. Rin slumped against the door to Gumi's house, lost in thought. Rin loved Gumi, right? So if Len was just as important as Gumi, did that mean Rin loved Len as well?

Len was important to her, she knew that, but was that the same as being in love? Miki was important to her as well, same as Iroha and Piko, but she wasn't in love with any of them. However, they were important to her in a different way than Gumi or Len were.

So if Gumi and Len were important in a way that was different than Rin's friends, did that mean they were both important in the same way? And if Gumi was important in the manner that Rin was in love with her, did that mean that Rin was also in love with Len?

Rin groaned and clutched her head, which awarded her curious looks from passersby, who had already been curious enough about the girl sitting against the door to a house they knew wasn't her own. Rin's cheeks grew

red at the attention and she stood up quickly, tugging down the hem of the school's miniskirt self-consciously. Then, she turned toward the door.

Rin stood there for a moment, trying to decide whether to knock or not, but, for some reason, she didn't feel the need to knock. Not like anyone inside would have heard her, anyway. Rin simply opened the door and entered Gumi's house for the first time ever.

It wasn't as bad as Rin had expected. She'd expected the house to be dimly lit and a total pigsty, remnants of fights between Gumi's parents littering the ground and evidence of her elder brother's irresponsible lifestyle adding to the mess. She'd expected vaguely toxic scents and sticky alcohol all over the floor.

The house was actually nice. Everything was tidy and brightly lit, though there was still some evidence of the brother's bad influence as a slight scent of something Rin couldn't quite recognize by instinctively wrinkled her nose at wafted off his shoes. Still, it was barely noticeable over the lavender air-freshener. Rin kicked off her shoes and placed them delicately with their toes facing toward the door. She looked about, but there was no spare set of slippers, so she would just have to do without.

Rin stepped delicately past the kitchen, where she could hear Gumi's parents yelling at one another, though they were speaking over each other, so, evidently, neither one was listening to the other. Rin considered peeking in, but, considering she wasn't supposed to be here in the first place, she didn't risk getting caught. She continued on, up the stairs, and was met by five doors. Rin stared at each one, having no idea which one to enter. She'd never been inside before, so she didn't know which one was Gumi's, and she didn't want to accidentally barge in on Gumi's brother. Still, nothing would be gained from standing here.

Rin chose a door at random and opened it a crack, peeping inside. Her heart stuttered as she made eye-contact with someone who most definitely wasn't Gumi. She froze and stared, unsure what else to do.

"Well, you've opened the door already," came the boy. Rin jumped at the sound of this stranger's voice. "Might as well come in."

Rin face flushed red as she tentatively entered the room, peering around herself. This room was pretty much what she'd expected Gumi's house to be like. A boy, probably a good few years older than Rin, sat in front of a laptop, but he'd turned around in his swivel chair to stare at her. She stood there, frozen stiff.

"Well hello there, bunny," he laughed.

Rin stared at him in confusion for a moment. Then, when she understood, she replied heatedly, "It's a ribbon, not ears."

He raised his eyebrows at her with an amused expression, reminding her a little bit of Len. "Either way, you look like a rabbit. So, bunny, what are you doing in my house? Without permission," he added pointedly.

Since Rin's face had reached maximum redness, the embarrassment spread its colour to her ears. "I came to see Gumi."

The brother frowned a little at her. "Rin, right?" Rin nodded. "Well, bunny—" Rin almost glared at him for that. Why ask her name and then continue calling her bunny? "—I really don't think Gumi wants to see you."

Rin frowned back at him. "But she's my friend."

Gumi's brother scowled deeply at that. "Well, aren't you just oblivious." He turned back to his computer screen. "*Your friend* doesn't want to see you. Go see that Len boy or something."

Rin froze. Even Gumi's brother, who Gumi denied even speaking to, knew about Len? Were Rin's feelings for him completely obvious to everyone but herself?

...

Rin sat on Miki's bed as Miki set out teacups for the two of them and Iroha, who had gone shopping with Piko but had promised to swing by for a visit as soon as possible. Rin accepted a full cup from Miki, who smiled at her and sat beside her on the bed. Rin had called Miki from her cell phone in front of Gumi's house and had asked to come over because she'd needed to talk to someone about everything that was going on. Miki had graciously invited Rin over. Now, Rin knew it was her responsibility to speak instead of rely upon Miki to ask her.

"You're in love with Piko and Iroha, right?" said Rin.

Miki smiled a little curiously at her and replied, "Yes."

"How do you know?" wondered Rin, leaning toward Miki, knowing how completely hopeless and desperate she sounded. But she was those things, anyway. "How do you know the feelings you have for them are different than ones you have for me?"

Miki giggled a little. "First of all, I don't want to kiss you. Don't take that the wrong way, Rin." Rin shrugged, too eager for information to be bothered. Miki thought for second. "Then, there's also just, I don't know, there's just a bond I have with them that I've never had with anyone before."

Rin considered that for a moment. Her bond with Len *definitely* was nothing like she'd had with anyone before, even Gumi. She proceeded to ask, "How do you know that bond means you love them?"

Miki shrugged. "I just know." She stared at Rin. "Now, Rin, I need to know. Who are we talking about: Gumi or Len?"

Rin's heart sank a little and she said sadly, "Am I that obvious?"

"As obvious as Iroha," ascertained Miki apologetically. "Gumi's the only one who can't see it. Then again, isn't that the way it always is?"

An idea hit Rin and she leaned toward Miki, her eyes widening hopefully. "If you can tell who I like, then can you tell if Gumi likes me back?"

Miki turned her head away, revealing nothing in her gaze. "I think that's something you should find out for yourself, Rin. Don't you agree?"

Rin sighed and returned to proper sitting position. "Yeah," she muttered. Then, she told Miki, "I guess we're talking about Len. I know I love Gumi, but I don't know how I feel about Len." Rin leaned forward, propping her chin on her fists and her elbows on her knees, staring at Miki's carpet floor. "I mean, I get jealous when Iroha and Miku are all over him, and I know I care for him deeply, but I don't know if that's love."

"It's Hello Iroha to the rescue!" cried Iroha as she burst into the room. Rin looked at her, completely unfazed after the last two years she'd spent with Iroha. "So, Rin, you wanna know if you love Len?"

Rin fidgeted uncomfortably. "Um, Iroha, don't you like Len, too?"

Iroha waved the comment away. "I did. I mean, like, he was more important than Miki for some time, but, then, I saw Miki at the haunted house with her cheeks all adorable and rosy from the cold, and everything for Len just went *poof*." Iroha added a hand motion to the poof and shrugged. "So, anyway, what you be willing to do for Len? Would you die for him?"

Rin didn't even have to think about it. "Yes."

"Would you die for Gumi?"

"Ye— Wait a minute, even you knew?" Rin couldn't believe that even the oblivious Iroha had noticed. How humiliating.

"No, Miki told me," said Iroha.

Rin turned to glare at Miki and said sarcastically, "Thanks."

Miki smiled apologetically and said in explanation. "It's Iroha."

"So, Rin, would you be willing to give up Gumi if it meant you could be with Len?" Iroha continued casually.

Again, Rin didn't even have to think. "No."

"And if you had to give up Len to be with Gumi?"

Rin was a bit slower to answer that one. "No," she said certainly.

Iroha didn't seem to notice Rin's delayed response. "Do you want to kiss Len?" Rin's face flushed red and she nodded, too embarrassed to speak. Iroha nodded in comprehension. "Okay, Hello Iroha out. If you can't figure it out now, you're hopeless."

Rin sat on Miki's bed in absolute silence, lost in her thoughts.

. . .

When Rin got home, Len was waiting. He didn't say anything to her and simply stared as she dropped her school bag and gazed at herself in the vanity mirror. Slowly, decisively, her hand raised up to the top of her head.

Rin loved Len. She was sure of it. Everything she felt for him was so strong, and it was so much simpler than her feelings for Gumi. After all, Len was a boy. Rin wouldn't have to be afraid of gossip if it was a boy that she was with instead of another girl. She couldn't stand having people talk about her and Gumi the way they talked about Haku and Neru.

Rin took the bow off her head and stared at it for a second. She clenched her hand around the bow and stared at it for a little longer. Then, she took a deep breath and turned toward Len.

She jumped a little. Len stood immediately behind her instead of on the bed where he'd been a second ago. He must have sensed that she was a little off. Rin stared at him for a second, losing herself in the darkness of his blue eyes.

Slowly, deliberately, she put her arms around his neck. He stood there patiently as she gathered her courage. Slowly, she closed the distance

between them until, finally, she closed her eyes and felt her lips press against his.

The bow fell out of her hand and lay abandoned on the ground.

Author's Note: I think I have good reason to be afraid of the reviews for this chapter *looks at the previous two paragraphs*. I fear I may have angered the yuri fans. I'm sorry! I'm gonna go hide somewhere safe to avoid being killed. And Gumi's brother can be whoever you imagine him as. This is really random but I feel bad for the random haunted house worker who found Rin's bow. It was a sign, she agreed! (Geez, I have no right to get mad. I wrote it.) Um, anyway, please don't abandon the story because of this scene! We're only just reaching the halfway point! Oi. Please don't kill me.

16. Hide Your Hesitation with Cold Gestures

Chapter Sixteen

Hide Your Hesitation with Cold Gestures

The school was completely abandoned at this point, but Gumi still wandered the halls, having no purpose but to kill time. She avoided the choir club's room, afraid to find Rin there, still waiting to walk home together. That actually happening was a long shot, but Gumi still felt the need to take precautions.

Gumi sighed as she thought of Rin. Gumi had clung to the hope that maybe, just maybe, she still had a chance against Len, but, evidently, she didn't. Gumi hadn't even been able to see Rin today. She'd been so traumatized and embarrassed by yesterday that she'd avoided Rin all day. At lunch, Gumi had convinced Miku to eat lunch in the cafeteria with her, though Gakupo and Luka had still gone to Rin's classroom to eat. Miku and Gumi had come to the conclusion that Luka had developed a crush on Miki. The pink-haired girl hadn't shut up about her since they'd first had lunch with that group. Gakupo seemed to enjoy Piko's male company, which was completely understandable. Because of these reasons, Miku and Gumi hadn't been offended when the two had ditched them for lunch.

Now, after school, Gumi was restlessly wandering the halls in order not to see Rin and end up walking home with her. It had been over half an hour since club activities had ended, but Rin was stubborn when she wanted to be.

Gumi sighed again. So was it going to become like old times again, when she found herself avoiding Rin because she couldn't deal with all the things she felt for her?

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?"

Gumi's ears perked up at the sudden arrival of Miku's voice. Gumi blinked, unsure if she'd imagined it or not. She gazed around herself in search of the

source, but the teal-haired girl was nowhere to be seen, and she couldn't pinpoint which direction the voice had come from. Right when Gumi was about to write it off as her imagination, Miku's voice came again.

"I don't know what came over me. Please forgive me."

Gumi finally figured out where the voice was coming from. Class 2-B's room. Gumi stared in disgust. Miku was probably talking to Len. Still, Gumi was curious and couldn't help herself as she crept over to the classroom door. It was slightly ajar, but not enough for Gumi to see properly inside. Gumi cursed softly and tried to look in, but all she saw was the back of Miku's head as the teal ponytails made it impossible to see Len's despicable form behind her.

Miku took a step closer to him and put her hand on her heart. Passionately, she proclaimed, "You're the only one I've ever loved! Please, I can't bear to lose you! I'll do anything I can to make it up to you!"

Len sighed. "Miku, I've forgiven other things, but I just can't see past this."

Gumi frowned. Wait a minute. That wasn't Len's voice. Still, Gumi knew the voice. She tried to wrap her head around it as Miku cried, "Please don't say that! There has to be something I can do to prove how much I love you!" Gumi opened the door a little more to watch Miku throw herself onto not-Len and grip tightly on the front of his shirt, staring at him desperately. Weakly, with tear-filled eyes, she murmured, "Please."

Then, Miku reached up on the tips of her toes and kissed Kiyoteru, home room teacher of class 2-B. Gumi's eyes widened in shock, and she waited for Kiyoteru to push Miku away, but the teacher did exactly the opposite. When Miku moved to pull away, Kiyoteru grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her back into a deep, passionate kiss. Gumi couldn't help but be disturbed watching her best friend making out with a teacher, but she found herself too captivated to look away.

Finally, when the two stopped kissing, Kiyoteru sighed and gazed at Miku with a sort of masochistic longing and regret, dread on his face. Gumi still

couldn't believe what she was watching when he spoke next.

"I love you, Miku," he murmured.

"Teru," murmured Miku, tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry. It'll never happen again. I'll even stop flirting with other boys. I only did it so you'd keep watching me, anyway." Miku looked away. "But I went to far with Len. I went farther than I've ever gone with any boy." Her face reddened as she stared shyly at Kiyoteru's shoes. "I shouldn't have ever gone that far with anyone but you." Kiyoteru turned equally red and looked over Miku's head to the opposite wall.

Gumi felt herself growing uncontrollably jealous. What kind of far did Miku mean? She'd slept with tons of boys before, so would it really be such a shock if she'd gone that far with Len? Still, Len had said he would kiss no one but Gumi until Rin came around, and Gumi had believed that he meant it. Gumi also found herself envying the simple fact that Miku had the ability to be so forward with her feelings. If Gumi had managed to be that way two years ago, how would things be now?

She and Rin could be together right now, if Gumi wasn't such a fraidy cat when it came to Rin.

"Don't ever do that again, Miku," Kiyoteru murmured, catching Gumi's attention once more. "Please. You have no idea how it killed me to see you all over him."

"I'm sorry," Miku apologized again, turning her eyes back up to Kiyoteru. "Len just has this affect on me. I can't say no to anything he asks, and I can't help but be crazy for him. I'm not the only one, too. Iroha is completely in love with Miki, but even she couldn't help but be all over Len, and she's likes girl for goodness sake!" Miku's voiced dropped and she told him in a secretive tone, "Even Gumi can't resist him sometimes."

Gumi's face reddened, and she couldn't help but bark out sharply, "Shut up, Miku!"

Gumi cursed at herself as Miku and Kiyoteru jumped a foot apart and spun wildly to turn toward the door. They stared at Gumi and exchanged looks of panic. Gumi simply stared at them accusingly. Eventually, Gumi decided to be the first one to speak.

"Hello, *Hiyama-sensei*," she said pointedly. "Are you offering extra help? I seem to be struggling in English. Unless these private sessions are only for girls who are willing to put out."

Miku barely acknowledged the insult. Instead, she kissed Kiyoteru farewell, but the man's eyes were locked on Gumi, in a complete panic. Miku then made her way through all the desks and made sure she had Gumi's full attention as she said, "Let's go for a walk and talk about this."

Gumi didn't argue. She was eager to see what excuse Miku found acceptable for what she was doing with a *teacher*. Miku led Gumi down various hallways before she finally sorted out her thoughts and decided how to explain herself.

"Gumi, what Teru and I have isn't as bad as you're thinking," Miku started.

Gumi snorted. "You're calling him 'Teru', Miku. I think it's as bad as I'm thinking."

Miku frowned at her. "I used to call him 'big brother Teru.'"

Gumi cringed and held up a hand to stop Miku, a million disturbing images soaring through her mind. "Okay, I totally don't want to hear about *that* kind of stuff."

"Not that way, perv," laughed Miku. Gumi had no idea how Miku could laugh in this situation. "I've known him since we were little."

"Teru was my neighbour, until he left for university when I went into middle school and met you. That's why I never told you about him." Miku laughed. "It was horrifying the first day of highschool when I walked in and found out he was my home room teacher. And he was so mean and

pretended not to know me, then he held me back after class to talk to me, though, and we talked things out.

"Anyway, so, Teru and I were really close as kids. I always got teased about my high voice by all the other kids, but Teru was always there to defend me, and he'd walk me home after school and everything. Teru was so cool." Miku drifted off wistfully for a moment before continuing her excited babble.

"Teru's part of a band, you know? Ice Mountain is their name. Is that just dreamy? Can't you just imagine him up there, on stage, performing for all those people, all adorable and sweaty?"

Gumi wrinkled her nose in distaste. "I'd rather not."

Miku giggled. "Right, sorry. So, I had a crush on Teru for years, but he never took me seriously, no matter how many times I told him. So, to keep his attention once I got in to highschool, I started flirting with a bunch of guys. Now, Gumi, this is a key point: I did not sleep with them. I just let them tell people that so Teru would hear. Honestly, I *was* a virgin." She sighed. "Then Len got all upset because of you and Rin and I wanted to comfort him and it was the only way I could think of and it seemed like a good idea at the time. But then Teru found out and, well, I think you were listening to that.

"So, you see, it's not like I'm in love with him because he's my teacher. I love him because he is him. I'd love him no matter how old he was." Miku smiled. "I was going to follow him to university as soon as I graduated, even if I hadn't seen him that first day of school." Miku fell silent and watched Gumi expectantly, waiting for a response.

Gumi sighed, and took a moment to think it through before finally deciding, "I guess I can accept that. You can go back to him if you want."

Miku brightened up instantly. "Thank you so much! I'll put his tie on the door if anything happens!"

"Ew, thanks for the visual."

Miku stuck her tongue out playfully and dashed off in the direction they came. Gumi rolled her eyes and continued around a corner, not realizing that Miku had lead her to the choir club's room. Gumi froze, but Rin wasn't there. Instead

"Gum-Gum, you finally showed up!" cried Iroha, who had been leaning against the wall next to the club room door.

"Iroha?" said Gumi in shock. Miki and Piko were nowhere to be seen, and Gumi had never seen Iroha away from one of the two. "What are you doing here? Clubs activities ended an hour ago."

"Well, you didn't come to walk home with Rin and Len, and I didn't want you to have to walk home alone." Iroha frowned a little at Gumi, perplexed and a little sad. "You didn't come to lunch today. I was worried."

Gumi felt overwhelming affection for the smaller girl in that moment and took Iroha into a large hug. "I'm sorry, Iroha. I had a bit of an argument with Rin last night and I just couldn't bring myself to go see her today."

"Okay, Gum-Gum, but please come tomorrow. It's lonely without you."

Gumi nodded. "I will."

Iroha smiled. "Good. 'Cause I'll be waiting for you."

Gumi smiled back at the girl, grateful for her friendship.

. . .

Iroha waved Gumi farewell as Gumi stood on the doorstep to her home. Gumi waved back at her, though she was still worried about having Iroha go home alone. Iroha lived downtown, and it didn't seem safe for someone who looked so young to be going through such shady neighbourhoods alone. Still, Iroha insisted that she would be fine, so Gumi couldn't really

argue. So, once Iroha was out of Gumi's sight, Gumi went into her house and focused her mind on other things.

In the next few days, Gumi would regret letting Iroha go.

Author's Note: The Kiyoteru thing isn't completely random. I have hints about it earlier in the story. It wasn't just off the top of my head. Iroha's a good girl. I love her so much. Honestly, in this entire story, she's my favourite. She's so innocent and honest and straightforward, unlike my protagonists. And muahahaha, I'm evil so you didn't get to see Rin this chapter. School week is almost over, yay! Week two, or six for OtakuGirl347, is almost over!

17. I'm Not So Strong that I'll Wilt Without

Chapter Seventeen

I'm Not So Strong that I'll Wilt Without a Sound

When Rin pulled away from the kiss, Len didn't want to let her go. He tried hungrily to kiss her again, but she put her hands against his chest and pushed him away. He stared at her in irritation. Softly, she murmured, "I need to think about this."

"What are you talking about?" Len snapped, completely losing his cool persona for the first time since Rin had met him.

"I-I still have to sort out my feelings," Rin said, a little startled by his sharpness. She was unable to look at Len and gazed at his shoes instead.

"There's nothing to sort out, Rin!" he argued. "You love me! There's no way that you don't!"

Rin blushed immensely and mumbled, "I know that, but I . . . I love someone else too, so I really need to—"

"She's a *girl*, Rin!" yelled Len. "How can you be in love with a *girl*?"

Rin found uncharacteristic anger stirring in herself at these words. Yes, she knew it was strange for her to love Gumi, but that didn't stop the fact that she'd loved Gumi since long before Len showed up. Rin found her tone unusually sharp as she retorted, "I didn't ask to fall in love with her, okay? I just do! I'd love her even if she was a boy!"

"So then what are you doing here?" hissed Len. "If you love her, are you just leading me on?"

Rin was stunned into silence. Tears rolled quietly down her cheeks as she stared at Len. Anger flashed like fireworks in his eyes, slowly dying away into remorse as he saw Rin trembling as she gazed at him. He murmured

her name gently, an apology appearing in his voice as he wrapped his arms around her tightly, allowing her to cry quietly into his shoulder as she stared at herself in the vanity mirror.

"I'm sorry, Rin," he whispered. "I know this is hard for you, and I'm not making it any easier."

"I don't know what to do," Rin said softly. "I can't choose between you two."

"Choose me, Rin," Len requested. "Please."

Rin nearly said yes right then and there, but she couldn't as she thought of the bow she'd abandoned, the bow Gumi had given her years ago. That bow was a sign, a sign that she and Gumi were meant to be, but she'd gotten rid of it to kiss Len. In a way, she'd already chosen Len over Gumi, but she couldn't bring herself to accept that she was giving up on Gumi after loving her for so many years.

"Please, Rin," Len begged. "I love you. You don't even know if Gumi feels the same way about you. I need you, Rin."

Rin knew he meant it. In her heart, she knew that Len truly needed her. And that was what drew her to say, "I won't wear the bow anymore, okay? I can't give you any more than that right now, Len. I'm sorry."

"That's okay, Rin, but, please, hurry up and make up your mind. I'm incomplete without you. Hurry up and choose me."

Rin closed her eyes and murmured, "I will."

. . .

Rin watched the classroom door anxiously at lunch. Iroha was equally as anxious, staring at the door and frowning. Gumi's group still hadn't arrived for lunch. Len had skipped out on lunch today, claiming that he wanted to

give Rin thinking space. Rin still felt uncomfortable without the bow on her head, and Miki had looked disappointed when she'd noticed its absence.

Iroha and Rin perked up as Luka and Gakupo entered the room, but Miku and Gumi didn't follow, and Luka and Gakupo said that they'd gone to eat in the cafeteria today. Rin's heart sank as she sullenly turned to her food. So Gumi didn't want anything to do with her now, huh? It was like old times, when Gumi would go off and do things with Miku and leave Rin behind.

Rin poked half-heartedly at her food. Just like old times.

. . .

Rin looked back and forth down the hallway after choir practice ended. It had been nearly ten minutes, but Gumi still hadn't shown up. Rin's heart fell further and further as she came to terms with the fact that Gumi wasn't going to show up. Iroha waited with Rin even after Miki and Piko left. After another ten minutes, Rin knew Gumi wasn't coming.

"I'm going home," said Rin, pushing herself off the wall. She turned to Iroha and waited for the other girl to follow her.

Instead, Iroha blinked at her and gazed down the hallway again. "I'm gonna wait a little longer for her," she murmured.

Rin frowned at Iroha. Iroha was too innocent to know that, sometimes, people just wouldn't show up without a word of warning. She sighed and said, "Iroha, Gumi's not coming today. You should just go home."

Iroha scowled at her irritably, though she continued gazing down the hallway. "I'm still gonna wait a bit longer."

Rin sighed in defeat and turned away. "Suit yourself," she grumbled as she walked down the hallway.

When she glanced back before turning a corner, Iroha was still standing there, loyally on the lookout for Gumi. Rin shook her head sadly and

continued away. Iroha hadn't been here when Gumi had started hanging out with Miku. She didn't know that, sometimes, Gumi just didn't bother to show up.

. . .

"Morning!" chirped Luka as she entered class 2-C's room before home room. Piko and Miki, who had been deep in conversation surrounding Iroha, looked up at the sound of her voice. Luka beamed at Miki. Rin found herself becoming incredibly self-conscious. She hadn't been as obvious as Luka, right?

"Good morning," replied Miki politely. "How are you?"

Luka suddenly seemed embarrassed by her effeminate welcome when she'd come into the room, and, though her face was red, she did her best to look tough and crossed her arms over her chest. She said in feigned disinterest, "Fine, you?"

Rin caught Len gazing at Luka with interest and frowned at him. He raised his hands in surrender when she ran her hand through her head to bring his attention to the lack of her bow. She had insisted that he make an effort to control his hormones for the moment. He'd laughed at the statement but agreed all the same.

"We're okay," said Miki, speaking for herself and Piko, "but Iroha seems to be absent today and she didn't call either of us."

"She never came home last night," said Piko, who seemed more bothered than Miki by Iroha's absence. When Luka looked at him strangely, he supplied, "We share an apartment."

Luka nodded and turned back to Miki. "She's probably just sleeping in," she said in an attempt to calm Miki's nerves, even though Miki never really seemed to have her feathers ruffled.

"That's true," said Miki casually, casting the pink-haired girl a smile. "Shouldn't you be in your classroom, Luka?"

Luka looked a bit put out by that comment. Rin assumed she'd interpreted it as Luka asking her to leave. "My class is all weird now that Haku and Neru are gone. Nobody will stop talking about it. They keep coming up with different theories. The latest is that Haku is actually the princess of some country and that Neru is her loyal servant, and that they received a threat and had to evacuate quickly."

"Not one for gossip, then?" asked Miki. "I'm certain Miku would enjoy being in such a class."

"I think it's disrespectful," agreed Luka vigorously, her eyes sparkling brightly at Miki's attention. "After all, we have no idea what happened to them. They could have been murdered for all we know."

Miki nodded sagely. "That's very true. You're a very thoughtful girl, Luka."

Luka turned bright red and, flustered, exclaimed, "I really should be heading back to class now!" She turned to leave and crashed into a desk. She laughed tensely in an attempt to brush it off and dashed out of the classroom. Miki tilted her head to the side and watched her go curiously.

...

Gumi showed up to lunch that day, but she completely ignored Rin. Rin waited tensely for a comment on the missing bow, but it never came. Gumi didn't even make eye contact with her. Rin felt her heart sink lower and lower as the lunch wore on and Gumi still made no attempt at conversation with her. Instead, she asked Piko about Iroha's absence, though, of course, he had no information to offer.

The next day went the same way. Luka stopped by in the morning, chatted with Miki, and dashed off as soon as Miki said something that was too much for her heart to handle. Then, they went to lunch, where Gumi appeared again, but Iroha still didn't show up. And, again, Gumi payed Rin

no mind, and Rin felt herself reaching to Len's hand for comfort at Gumi's cold shoulder.

Miki didn't want to go to choir that night, so the three friends skipped practice for the day and walked out of the school after the first bell. "Iroha won't answer her phone," Miki said. "I'm worried about her."

"She didn't come home last night, either," said Piko miserably. "And she hasn't been home. Her bed is still tidy from when I made it and all the food is still in the fridge. I have no idea where she went."

"Did she mention anything about going somewhere?" questioned Rin.

Piko shook his head, disconsolate. "I haven't seen her since choir two days ago. Did she mention anything about going somewhere to you?" He gazed at Rin with a hopefulness that broke her heart.

But Rin had to shake her head as well. "She said she was going to wait for Gumi."

"Then maybe Gumi knows," said Miki, placing her cell phone to her ear. "I'll call her." Miki excused herself, and Piko and Rin stood quietly a few feet away until she returned. Piko and Rin looked at her hopefully. Miki shook her head sadly, and their spirits fell. "She says that Iroha walked home with her and then went straight home."

"So no one knows where she is," said Piko, on the verge of tears. Rin hugged him, glad that Len had gone home before her. "It's so empty in that apartment without her."

"We'll come stay the night then," murmured Rin before she knew what she was saying. "Who knows? Maybe she'll show up."

Piko nodded gratefully as he fought back the tears. Rin and Miki stared at each other over his shoulder, sharing their doubts silently, wondering what had happened to their best friend.

Len was oddly complaint when she told him she had to spend the night at Piko's. He seemed to have grown more relaxed since she'd locked her bow away. Her parents were equally indulgent, though they did complain about her leaving them to care for her cat by themselves. They never payed much attention to the cat, so they didn't understand how little assistance it really needed.

Rin arrived at Piko's apartment before Miki and took the boy quickly in a hug. She gazed at all of Iroha's Hello Kitty memorabilia around the apartment and the abandoned school uniform pieces and all other signs of Iroha's presence in this apartment, and of her absence, like the clothes set out for the next day of school that had yet to be worn.

Miki arrived soon after, and they stayed up most of the night waiting for Iroha to come in and cheerfully announce her return. The girl never came.

Author's Note: I know this is a late-night update, but I went to movie with some friends at my new school :) So I just got home. Wah, I didn't like writing this chapter. I miss my Iroha-tan. I'm annoyed with most of my characters, so Iroha was always a relief to include. Urgh, I don't know if Gumi annoys me more or if it's Rin. I know Gumi is being a jerk, but Rin does nothing about it, so they're both to blame, in my mind. Alright, have a great weekend, people! See you Monday! I'm going to sleep now 'cause I still have school tomorrow.

18. I'm Waiting for the Day to Clear Up

Chapter Eighteen

I'm Waiting for the Day to Clear Up

Rin was harder than ever to get close to. It had been over a week since Rin had refused to leave Len, and, now, she was always with him. She never wore the bow Gumi had given her anymore, even though Gumi still wore the goggles Rin had given her every day. Gumi wasn't even sure she wanted to talk to Rin anymore. Rin had such a dark aura around her lately, and she was so gloomy all the time. It made it even harder than ever to approach her, and Gumi felt as though Rin didn't really want to talk to her, anyway, or anyone, for that matter.

Gumi was travelling to Shion-sensei's class, flanked by Luka and Miku. Miku was alarmingly quiet as she gazed ahead, deep in thought. Meanwhile, Luka was babbling on and on about her latest crush, trying to convince them to guess who it was. Gumi had already attempted to play along and guessed Miki, but it appeared Luka had changed the target of her affection already. But, that was just the way it was with Luka.

However, today, Miku and Gumi both lacked the patience to deal with Luka and shouted simultaneously, "Shut up!"

Luka stopped in the middle of her sentence and gaped at the other two girls, but neither offered an apology and simply continued walking. Luka pouted and caught up to them and then announced, "It's Rin, okay?"

Gumi felt herself growing tense, though she knew she had nothing to worry about with Luka liking Rin. Still, she couldn't help but reply haughtily, "Good luck with that, Luka, but, if you hadn't noticed, she's evidently straight and all over Len." Even Gumi could hear the bitterness in her voice. She could feel redness creeping up and, before anyone could comment on it, she turned to walk the other direction and said with a certain amount of emotional detachment, "I'm not feeling well. I'm going to the nurse's office."

She could feel the other two girls watching her as she walked away. She felt nothing but numbness as she made her way through the hallways and, without a word to the nurse, flopped onto the bed and hid under the covers.

School sucked. Life sucked. Everything sucked.

Everything was terrible nowadays. Everyone could feel it. Iroha had been missing for two weeks now, and no one knew where she was. Piko had even called all her relatives and any other people she'd once been friends with, but none had heard a word. Rumours spread about the girl, eventually reaching the ears of Gumi, Rin, Miki, Piko, Miku, Gakupo, and Luka. Ever since the rumours had begun to grow louder and be heard on the lips of nearly every student, Piko had stopped coming to school. Gumi wished she could do the same. Listening to each and every rumour, from basic quarrels with Piko to gruesome deaths and worse, Gumi began to feel sicker and sicker, knowing that any one could be true, and that it was her own fault for letting Iroha go that night, or even for avoiding Rin. If she hadn't avoided Rin, Iroha wouldn't have waited for her and would be safely home with Piko now.

Gumi squeezed her eyes shut as she caught Iroha's name come from a conversation in the hallway. She heard mentions of Neru and Haku, too, who had returned to gossip fame after Iroha's disappearance and questions of a connection between the two arose. Gumi forced her emotions away as she listened, struggling not to feel anything at all as she fell into a sort of sleep that was haunted with images of Iroha's smile as she'd waved farewell.

. . .

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty."

Len's voice grated in Gumi's ears as she woke slowly from her sleep. She blinked her bleary eyes at him and felt anger stir up at the cocky smirk on his face. She really wanted nothing more than to punch him. Maybe that would bring Rin to her senses.

Gumi froze. If Len was here, that meant

"Are you okay, Gumi?" asked Rin worriedly. Gumi didn't miss that her hand was in Len's, or that the girl made no move to pull away from him like she usually did when caught with him. Rin placed her free hand against Gumi's forehead. "Do you have a fever?"

Gumi's face flushed red and she instinctively slapped Rin's hand away. Rin stared at her, stricken. *Dammit. That's not what I wanted to do.* But Gumi couldn't help herself as she snapped, "Don't touch me." She jumped quickly out of the bed, scolding herself inwardly. This was the first time she'd even spoken to Rin since that day she'd brought Rin to her house. Her eyes lingered on Rin and Len's joint hands. "Just stay away from me."

"Gumi . . . ," Rin tried, heartbroken, though she didn't break away from Len.

Gumi wanted to sigh. She was going to make Rin cry again. She could see tears glimmering in Rin's eyes. Still, she couldn't try to ignore what she had just done to the yellow-haired girl, and, honestly, she didn't want to be with Rin if Rin refused to let go of Len's hand even for a moment to check on her.

"I'm fine," Gumi muttered, spinning around. "I'm going back to class."

She stormed past Miki, who was standing a little behind Rin and Len. She glared at the girl, who stared at her with unseeing eyes, as she had with everyone but Len since Iroha had gone missing.

School sucked.

. . .

Gumi hated lunch. Every day she went, she was reminded of her promise to see Iroha at lunch. But the girl had never shown up. Then, there was Piko's absence, and having both him and Iroha gone just made it so quiet at lunch. Miku seemed too preoccupied in her own thoughts to pay any attention to

anyone else, and she constantly gazed at Kiyoteru in the hallways, which still bothered Gumi. Then, Gakupo and Luka were arguing a lot more than usual, which did nothing but irritate Gumi and Miku. Rin was completely attached to Len. They were nearly inseparable. Gumi knew she'd pushed Rin to this, but she couldn't find the bravery to try to make up with her. Add onto it all that Miki was constantly clinging to Len now, though not to the extent Iroha and Miku always had. Still, even Miki couldn't resist him. Gumi found herself resenting Miki. Miki was meant to be in love with Iroha or Piko or at least one of them, but, instead, she was nearly as clingy with Len as Rin was.

Gumi wouldn't even bothering coming to lunch if it weren't for Iroha. A part of her still hoped Iroha would appear and congratulate her for actually coming to lunch that day. She knew it would never happen, but she had to hope for something.

Gumi walked home alone that night. She told Rin not to wait for her after practice. Gumi couldn't imagine walking home with Rin and Len now. Anyway, she really just wanted to go home and watch mindless television for hours on end. Of course, as it always was when Gumi got home, her parents were fighting. She wouldn't care if it weren't for the fact that they'd taken over the room where the television was. Gumi scowled and headed upstairs instead, ignoring her brother as he tried to converse with her and shutting the door in his face.

For the first time, her brother wasn't deterred and followed her into her room. She glared at him, and he stared back at her, refusing to back down. She ignored him and flopped back onto her bed. He sat beside her, earning himself another glare, but, again, he paid it no mind and proceeded to attempt conversation again.

"They're fighting," he informed her.

She raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him. "Nothing new, numbskull."

"But they're arguing differently tonight," he insisted. "I can tell."

Gumi rolled her eyes and turned her head to stare at the wall, scrunching her nose as the smell of smoke wafted off her brother. "Or you're high again."

Now it was his turn to glare. "They aren't just arguing about me this time, Gumi. They're arguing about you, too."

Gumi frowned and replied uninterestedly, "Well, one of my best friends has mysteriously gone missing. Maybe they're afraid she's gonna be involved in something scandalous and ruin our family's image by association." Casually, she added, "Or maybe you accidentally told them their daughter is a lesbian. I can see why they'd be mad at that. Maybe I'll be disowned. Then again, they haven't disowned you yet."

"My God, Gumi, shut up! Take this seriously!"

Gumi stared at him, bored and too tired to bother feeling anything at all. "I am."

"So you just don't care? Is that it?"

Gumi stared at him vacantly. "I really don't care about anything right now. Rin's with Len, Miku's banging the teacher, and my best friend could be dead for all I know." She felt tears spring to her eyes and immediately regretted the words. How could she say something so horrible so casually? Iroha was so sweet and innocent. She didn't deserve something like that, and she didn't deserve to be talked about in such a way. Gumi stared at the wall and murmured softly, "Please just get out."

"But Gumi—"

"I said get out!" Gumi yelled, hitting her brother with her pillow. He listened to her this time, thankfully. Gumi almost had a moment of peace, but her cell phone rang the moment her brother left. She sighed and answered, the specifically chosen ring tone signalling the oncoming

"!"

"What is it, Miku?" Gumi asked, amused despite her annoyance.

"I'm gonna run away with Teru!"

Gumi blinked at the sudden plot development. Slowly, carefully, she worded her response. "Is that so?"

"Mm hm! Teru and I decided to run away together! Who needs school anyway? Teru's band's gonna go big and then he'll be able to support both of us, right?"

Gumi tried to keep up and gave a half-hearted, "I guess so."

"Right! So, we're gonna disappear suddenly in the next few days, and you gotta pretend you have no idea what happened, 'kay?"

Gumi narrowed her eyes at the phone. "Then why tell me?"

Miku giggled. "'Cause I love you, Gumi, and I didn't want you to worry about me, what with everyone disappearing nowadays."

Gumi rolled her eyes with a smile. Well, Miku was *trying* to be considerate. Still, Gumi wasn't very pleased by Miku's ideas. But she might as well let her try it out, and if it didn't work out, Miku would be back quickly.

"Thanks, Miku. Good luck with Hiyama-sensei. Be sure to keep in contact."

"I will. Love you, Gums. I'll miss you. Will you come to visit me sometimes?"

Gumi laughed. "Of course." Gumi's door opened at that moment. She looked up at her parents, who stood side by side, not arguing for the first time Gumi could remember. Gumi was so shocked by this that she couldn't avert her gaze.

"We have something important to talk to you about," said her mother.

Staring at them, Gumi said to Miku, "I gotta go. Best of luck."

Miku giggled, blissfully happy. "Bye bye. Talk to you soon!"

"Yeah," Gumi said absently before hanging up her phone and following her parents downstairs.

Author's Note: Sorry I haven't updated this week! I was sick and couldn't muster up the energy to do anything other than watch hours of anime and read a complete 23 volume manga series. But I'm back now! Sorry 'bout that. Anyway, I miss Iroha. Writing without her sucks. And, if you couldn't tell by the fact that Luka has already crushed on three characters, I decided to make her a ditz since she's like always a tough girl character. And, in October, I'm gonna be having a Halloween fic going at the same time as this one (don't worry, this one takes priority. The other one is gonna be pretty short, anyway). So, yeah. It's the pairing of Len and Gakupo with yandereness. Because yanderes go with Halloween in my mind and I felt like doing yaoi instead of yuri since all other fics I have planned tend to have a yuri pairing. So, if your interested, check it out! First chapter will be up October second. Okay, enough self-advertising, thanks for reading, guys! Or girls Let's just say people. Thanks for reading, people! (Even though I call girls "guys" all the time)

19. I'm a Blue Rose

Chapter Nineteen

I'm a Blue Rose

Rin's vision blurred with tears as Gumi stormed out of the nurse's office. Gumi still wouldn't talk to her. Gumi hadn't said a word to her in the past two weeks, the time when Rin had needed her the most. And now, again, Gumi refused to acknowledge Rin. Rin was so worried about Gumi, who had been visibly troubled for quite a while now, but Gumi wouldn't let her be there for her. And, at the same time, Gumi refused to be there for Rin.

But Len was there for her. Len hadn't left Rin's side since Iroha had gone missing, not even at night, when they shared her bed and she slept against his chest. He didn't push her for anything more than she was willing to give, but, now, she was willing to give him more than before. She accepted his kisses when they were in private and gifted him with some of her own, because, if there was one thing this time had proven to Rin, it was that Len would be there for her, no matter what, even if Gumi wouldn't.

In the past two weeks, Rin had made her choice, and she chose Len.

Or, at least, she thought she had, but, every time she made a move to tell him, she thought of Gumi, and her heart ached so much that she thought she may throw up. She still couldn't let herself fully be his, because, in her mind, her heart still belonged to Gumi, and she wouldn't be able to fully give herself over until she knew that her life with Gumi was never going to be. But Rin couldn't imagine being without Gumi, and she would never be able to survive if Gumi gave her over to Len.

Rin spent many fitful nights thinking about this, and even more thinking about Iroha, who had just vanished without a word. Rin, Len, and Miki spent most of their time after school at Piko's home to keep him company, and Miki had even begun sleeping over there, though she'd always watched Len longingly as he left. Rin didn't mind Miki's affections for Len because she knew that Len was hers and that Miki needed him right now. After all,

Miki was in love with Iroha, and now Piko was never around, but she was so used to having them both with her all the time. Rin knew how lonely Miki must be feeling.

"Come, my magenta tulip," Len said, offering Miki his hand as she stood a little behind them. Miki's eyes fell to his hand and she daintily placed her hand in his. He guided her gently to the bed and had her sit. "You should rest."

Miki shook her head, though she was so exhausted that her eyelids had drooped so much that she seemed to already be asleep. Miki had barely gotten any sleep since Iroha had disappeared. She stayed up most nights calling Iroha's cell phone over and over again, even though no answer ever came, and sent as many e-mails as she could to Iroha's address. Still, no one had heard anything from Iroha, and Miki's efforts were taking their toll on her.

"Come on, Miki," coaxed Rin, concerned for the girl who was dead on her feet. "I'll keep calling Iroha while you sleep, okay?"

"But I want to be the one to talk to her first," murmured Miki, though she was lying down submissively as Len stroked her hair soothingly.

"It's okay, my magenta tulip. Just go to sleep," he whispered.

Miki shook her head again, but she found herself falling asleep the next moment, anyway. Rin watched her anxiously, worried that the girl may fall into a horrible nightmare the instant she fell asleep.

The nurse sent them on their way after they'd explain Miki's situation, and Rin and Len walked through the halls to Kiyoteru's class quietly. Rin stared at Len and forced herself to be brave enough to tell him what had been nagging her for a while now. She took a breath and tugged on his sleeve for his attention. His eyes locked on hers, entrancing her as he gave her all his attention.

"Why don't I have a nickname?" she wondered. "You've given almost everyone else a nickname. Just Gumi and I don't have them." She looked away shyly. "I know you don't like Gumi, so wouldn't expect you to nickname her, but why don't I have one?"

Len was quiet for a moment, and, though she wasn't looking at him, she could sense his smile when he asked her, "Do you want a nickname?"

Tentatively, Rin nodded. Len chuckled, and her cheeks reddened.

"Alright then. I've had one picked out for you for a while." She turned to look at him, and he lifted her chin up to place his lips on hers. Then, he smiled at her and said, "You're my blue rose."

Rin smiled. "Blue rose?" She leaned up and kissed him back, locking their bodies together for a few seconds before pulling away and smiling at him. "Then I'm a blue rose."

Len smiled at her. "Yes, my blue rose."

"This is a school, you know."

Rin and Len spun to face Gumi, who stared at them, her face carefully composed to mask her emotions. Rin scowled at her. She hated when Gumi went like that.

"So what?" Len asked.

Gumi didn't even look at him. All her attention was on Rin. "I'm talking to Rin, not you."

Rin felt herself grow angry. What gave Gumi the right to look at her with such judgement in her gaze? It wasn't like it was a crime for two people to kiss. Gumi could have just walked away if it bothered her so much. Haughtily, Rin replied, "What's wrong with us kissing?"

Gumi frowned at her, still keeping her expression carefully guarded. "As I said, this is a school, not a place to make out with your boyfriend."

Rin felt the heat burning in her face, but she found herself too angry to let Gumi get to her. "What business is it of yours?"

Gumi shrugged and looked away. "Well, I don't want to see it."

"That's too bad for you, then," Rin snapped. "I have every right to kiss him if I want to."

"And you want to?" Gumi asked, staring at Rin coolly.

Rin glared sourly at Gumi. "Yes, I do."

Gumi revealed no emotion as she said, "So that's it, huh?"

"So that's what?"

"Len's the most important person in your life now, right? I don't mean anything to you anymore."

Rin felt like she was about to explode. Grief at the comment was swallowed up by all the pent up anger that had formed over the years. Rin closed her eyes tightly and shouted, "It doesn't mean he's the most important person to me, Gumi! But yes, Len is probably more important than anyone to me right now!"

Gumi snorted and turned her head away. "Well then, I might as well leave."

When Gumi turned to go, Rin grabbed her by the wrist and held on tightly, refusing to let go until Gumi looked at her again. Both gazes flashed with anger as Rin yelled, "No, you're not going! You're going to listen to what I have to say for once, got it?"

Gumi's anger disintegrated and she looked completely dumbstruck as nodded, frightened by Rin's out-of-character anger. Rin couldn't find it in herself to feel bad for her aggressiveness. Instead, she continued on.

"You have no right to judge me for being with Len! Len has always been there for me, even when you haven't. Where were you when I was all alone after you abandoned me to be with Miku, huh? Where were you every single night I cried because my best friend wasn't there for me anymore? And all those times when I had to eat alone at lunch, or walk home by myself, or work on a group project without any other members? I was completely alone after you decided to be Miku's best friend, but I never said anything about it, even when we became friends again. You know why? Because I wanted to make this work, and I'm so lonely without you, Gumi! You mean the world to me!"

"Rin . . .," said Gumi softly.

"No," snapped Rin. "I'm not done yet."

"I tried to keep our friendship going after you became friends with Miku, but you wouldn't even try! Do you have any idea how many times I called you and you didn't even bother picking up? So, after a while, I decided that I just had to wait for you to come around and find me again, but you never did. You didn't call, not even once." Rin couldn't stop herself as tears began to flow freely, but she still pressed on.

"Then, you finally did come back to me, but you keep getting mad at me or Len and I don't even know why! Why do you care so much whether or not I'm dating Len? He's a good guy, Gumi, and I could do much worse."

Gumi interrupted, shaking her head. "No, Rin," she said. "I could learn to deal with it if it were Piko, or even Gakupo, but Len is about the worst that you can get."

Rin couldn't believe her ears. Loudly, she hissed, "What is wrong with him, Gumi? He's never done anything to you! Why do you hate him so much?"

Gumi's eyes fell to the floor, and her expression grew even more protected. "I have my reasons."

"Then, for goodness sake, tell me, Gumi! Tell me why you hate Len so much! Tell me why I should have to stay away from him forever!"

Gumi's eyes locked on Len for a moment before turning back to Rin. "I'm not willing to tell you that."

Rin stared at Gumi in complete disbelief. Really? Really? Gumi wouldn't even tell her why? "Do you even have a reason, or are you just hating him for convenience's sake?" she wondered accusingly.

Gumi let out a groan of frustration and cried, "Rin, he's cheating on you with basically every girl in school! He's even slept with Miku!"

Rin flinched at her words. Len had actually slept with someone? As in, the other kind of slept with, not the kind she and Len did every night? Rin chased the thought away. This wasn't about Len's infidelity. This was about Rin and Gumi. "Look, Gumi, I don't really care about that right now. No matter what, Len's been there for me, and you haven't."

Gumi stared at Rin weakly. "Rin, I've been there for you the best I can."

Rin shook her head angrily and glared at Gumi. "No, you haven't, Gumi. If you've really been there for me, where have you been the last two weeks? Where have you been when I've been struggling with losing you again, when I've been doing my best to help Piko and Miki, when I've lost one of the only people who was there for me when you weren't? Face it, Gumi. You're only there for me when you want to be, and you don't want to be there for me when things get complicated." Rin felt her anger fizzling away to sadness. She gazed at Gumi, noticing for the first time that Gumi had been crying, too. "I've really needed you, Gumi, but you haven't been here for me," Rin finished, her voice cracking with sorrow.

"Rin," Gumi said after she was sure Rin was done. "I'm so sorry. I've wanted to be there for you, I really have, but I just couldn't, and I don't think I can be anymore."

Rin froze. This was it. The rejection she'd been waiting for all this time, the rejection that would let her give her heart to Len fully. But Rin didn't want that. She didn't want to give her heart to Len. She wanted to give it to Gumi, no matter how horrible Gumi was. Fresh tears overflowed at Rin shouted, "So you're just going to give up now that things have gotten hard? You're just going to leave me again?"

"Rin—" Gumi started.

"No!" cried Rin, her eyes squeezing shut as all her emotions exploded into one four-word statement. "I hate you, Gumi!"

Everything went silent, even the crowd that had gathered to watch during the fight. Gumi's bangs had fallen in front of her face, making it impossible to see her reaction. Rin felt herself regretting the words, but, at the same time, she didn't want to take them back, because she had truly meant them. For endless lifetimes, they stood there quietly, until Gumi's subdued voice carried gently over to Rin.

"It's not that I don't want to be with you anymore, Rin," she said. "There's nothing I want more in this world than to be with you. But I can't." Before Rin could say anything else, Gumi continued. "My parents are finally splitting up. My mother doesn't believe that my brother can be saved, so she's taking me and moving us far away. My dad and my brother are going to stay here, but I'm never going to see them, or anyone who lives here, again."

Everything fell silent again. Rin stared at Gumi, horrified. Gumi was going to be gone? Forever? Rin would never see her again?

Rin let go of Len's hand for the first time in over two weeks and hugged her friend as tightly as she could, and they both stood there in silence, crying, for an unmeasurable amount of time.

Author's Note: Ugh, I've been waiting for so long to finally have Rin tell Gumi how she felt. Still, this was intense to write. Oi. Killer. Hope you liked it. And, for those who asked, I'm completely fine now :) No

more sickness. Next chapter has one of the first scenes I had planned from the beginning! Look forward to it! And, also, don't you just hate when people all slow down when they're passing by to watch something personal between two people they don't even know (such as this fight)? Nosy people, sheesh (I'm one of those people, actually). And now I'm off to do homework. Goodbye, people.

20. Don't Wish for Goals or Rewards

Chapter Twenty

Don't Wish for Goals or Rewards

I hate you, Gumi!

The words rang over and over in Gumi's ears as she sat on her bed that night, staring at her carpet in a trance-like state. Her house was uncomfortably quiet without the sound of her parents' fighting, and Miku wasn't picking up, so she must have chosen tonight to disappear. Gumi had tried calling Iroha a few times, just in case, but no response came. Rin had called several times, but Gumi couldn't pick up.

I hate you, Gumi!

Rin hadn't tried to take it back. She hadn't even tried to apologize. She'd said the words so passionately that Gumi knew they were how she truly felt. And, for once, Gumi didn't blame Len for it. Sure, it would be easy to blame him, but Gumi was tired of blaming Len. Blaming Len for everything was what kept Rin going back to him. If Gumi had just been there for her, Rin would be by her side, always, and Len would be inconsequential.

Gumi stared at her phone as it vibrated again. The ID told her it was Rin again, but Gumi simply stared at it. She watched as the buzzing died away again and continued to stare at it as it alerted her that she had a missed call. Gumi couldn't pick up. She couldn't, not after Rin had said that to her

I hate you, Gumi!

Gumi wanted to cry again, but she'd cried so much that night that she couldn't remember how to. Instead, she gazed numbly at the carpet, running the words over and over again in her head.

Then, she heard a tiny clack. She froze and perked up, gazing around for the source. Another clack came, and Gumi was able to pinpoint it. She stared as pebbles knocked against her window. She looked at the setting sun against the thin coat of freshly fallen snow on the neighbour's rooftops. Slowly, she came to the window as more pebbles struck it. She gazed down on Rin, who stood there, shivering terribly in her school uniform, which had never been any use at preventing the cold from entering, even though school had ended over an hour ago. Gumi frowned and slid her window open.

"What are you doing?" Gumi called down.

"You aren't picking up," replied Rin. "Can I come in?"

"How long have you been out there?" Gumi wondered.

"I came over right after choir," said Rin. "I really want to talk to you."

Gumi averted her gaze, focusing instead on Rin's footprints in the snow. "I really don't want to talk right now, Rin. Please, just go home."

Rin frowned at her. Then, shrugging her backpack over her shoulder, she replied haughtily, "Fine."

Gumi let out a sigh of relief and closed her window. However, she then heard the front door open. *She wouldn't*, thought Gumi as she dashed out her bedroom to the top of the stairs. Sure enough, there was Rin, taking off her shoes.

"What are you doing?" cried Gumi.

"I'm going home," replied Rin.

"I meant your home," said Gumi, narrowing her eyes.

Rin stared at her evenly. "This is my home, Gumi, no matter how cheesy that sounds, because it's where you are. If I went to my house, Len would

be there, but you wouldn't, and you're my home, Gumi. You're the one I want to see right now."

"See me some other time, Rin," said Gumi tensely as Rin's words earlier that day repeated again in her head. "I don't want to see you right now."

Gumi turned and entered her room again. Sure enough, Rin followed her inside. Gumi stared out the window, refusing to acknowledge Rin. Rin stood there quietly for a moment before grabbing onto Gumi with an icy hand. Gumi jumped and instinctively turned to Rin. Rin hung her head and murmured, "Please, Gumi. I can't wait any longer."

Gumi stared at her, unsure what to say. Rin took a breath and held a hand out to Gumi. Gumi stared at the white piece of fabric Rin held in that hand and then turned back to Rin. Rin smiled gently. "Please, can I wear it again?"

Gumi was still at a loss for words, so she ended up saying coldly, "I never told you to take it off."

Rin was quiet for a moment. Then, she repented, "I know. But I need to know that you still want me to wear it."

Gumi stared into Rin's eyes for a moment, the eyes that were so much like Len's and yet so different. His were so dark, cold, and enchanting. Rin's were heartfelt, warm, and beautiful. As much as Gumi's entire being wished for Len, she would never want him more than she wanted Rin. Rin was the only one she'd ever want. No matter how Rin felt about her, or even about Len, Gumi could never let her go, not again.

Gumi took the bow without a word and wove it into Rin's hair.

She would never let Rin go, but, soon, she would be taken far away from her.

. . .

Miku was officially gone. She didn't show up to school the next day, or the one after that. Gumi missed Miku, but she knew Miku must be happy with Kiyoteru, so it was all for the best. Gumi waited patiently as Kaito rambled on and on about some World History or other, amusing herself by comparing the quality of her doodles to that of the ones Miku had scribbled into her book once. When the bell for lunch rang, Gumi was the first one out the door. She didn't miss Kaito's glare.

Gumi was running into Rin's classroom, not paying attention to anyone around her, when she crashed straight into someone. She let out a squeak as she toppled over on top of them, landing in a very suggestive position. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed, *Please don't be Len, please don't be Len*. Then, she opened her eyes and stared at Kiyoteru. She jumped up quickly and straightened her clothes as the teacher stood up.

"Sorry, Hiyama-sensei," she said with a small bow. "I was paying attention to where I was going. Won't happen again."

"That's quite alright, Gumi," he replied. Then, sheepishly, he looked at the crowd around him and whispered, "I need to talk to you. Can we go somewhere more private?"

"I'm sorry, Hiyama-sensei, I really do have that math homework done, I just forgot it!" she exclaimed frantically.

"Not that!" he whispered through gritted teeth. "Just come on."

Gumi followed him obligingly, trying to come up with a good excuse for the incomplete work, when something clicked inside of her head. "Hey," she said, "aren't you supposed to be gone now?"

Kiyoteru grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her around the back of the building, into a shadowy corner. "That's what I wanted to talk about," he informed her.

Gumi, meanwhile, distractedly noticed how unsafe her position was and told him, "Look, I'm not gonna start calling you Teru. I already like

someone."

"I love Miku, Gumi," he said with a withering expression. "I'm not trying to seduce you." He shook his head and groaned. "Anyway, do you know where she is?"

"I dunno, she was supposed to be running away with you, wasn't she?" Gumi wondered.

Kiyoteru sighed and drooped visibly. Grief made his face grow instantly older and a thousand horrid, painful emotions played along his face. He stood there stiffly for a moment. Then, for the first time, Gumi saw a grown man cry. His tears were quiet, unlike the painful sobbing that Gumi always got, but they seemed equally as sorrowful. Gumi didn't push him always as he leaned down and buried his face in her shoulder. She didn't know what to do: pat his head, rub his back, hug him? She simply stood there, at a loss.

"Have you watched the news lately?" he asked quietly after many minutes had passed.

"No," Gumi replied, just as quiet.

"Then please watch it tonight," he whispered. "And know this: Miku never came when we were supposed to meet, and no one's seen her since."

. . .

Gumi did watch the news. After she did, she found it impossible to feel anything, lest the feelings swallow her whole and threaten to take away the breath in her chest. Instead, she went through the next day lifelessly. She only communicated once that entire day, when she exchanged a gaze with Kiyoteru that let him know she understood, and that all hope was gone in this world. *Who is it worse for?* she wondered. *The man who's lost the girl he planned to marry, or the girl who's lost two people she loved?*

Rin didn't even get a chance to try to talk to Gumi, because, the moment Gumi caught sight of her, she disappeared into the crowd. She needed Rin,

right now, but she wanted to shelter the other girl for as long as she could, and, besides, Rin didn't have herself to blame, unlike Gumi, so Gumi had to punish herself and stay away from Rin for now.

Even if Gumi hadn't watched the news, two days later, she would have known, because all students were called to an important assembly, where the principal warned all the girls that some sick pervert was going around killing teenage girls, injecting them with poison and taking their hair as a prize. A list of found victims were read aloud, along with the downtown alleys where their bodies had been found. Two bodies, an older and younger sister in their second and third year of middle school, had been found in an alley that Iroha crossed on her way home. Another had been found in an alley not far from the café where Kiyoteru and Miku had been meant to meet. Of the girls that had recently gone missing in this school, none were on the list, but the students were wise enough to make the connection.

Gumi could have walked Iroha home. She could have had Iroha stay over. She could have not avoided Rin and had Iroha go safely home with Piko and Miki. She could have done anything, anything that could have saved the innocent girl from such a horrible fate. She could have kept that smile on Iroha's face forever, that smile that played over and over in Gumi's mind as she lay on her bed that night.

Gumi could have told Miku not to go. She could have told her how crazy it was to run away with a teacher. She could have asked Miku to come see her first. She could have told the principal about Miku and Kiyoteru before she'd had a chance to run away. She could have kept her best friend here, where she was safe, and protected her from danger. She could have saved Miku's life.

Gumi could have done so much. It was like everything she'd ever done was wrong. Everything she'd done screwed things up, and she wasn't even the one paying the price. She wasn't the one missing, or the one dead, or the one with no one to turn to, or the one without a loved one to cherish any longer.

Gumi stayed home for a week after that. When she went back to school, she did nothing but copy notes, do assignments, and eat mechanically. Then, she went home and turned her phone off so no one would bother her.

Rin tried to talk to her, several times. She tried coming into the house again, and Gumi let her, but she couldn't bring herself to reply to anything that Rin said. Rin came there everyday now, and she stayed there until Gumi's brother told her she had to go home and escorted her back to her home.

Rin brought dinner one night, but Gumi wouldn't eat. She didn't like eating anymore. It all tasted like dirt. She only ate at lunch, and she only ate so she wouldn't have to talk. Rin was trying to convince her to eat something when Gumi finally decided to speak.

"Miku's hair was really pretty," she said sullenly. "So was Iroha's." She laughed without humour. "Don't you think they'd make great prizes?"

Rin flinched. "Don't talk about them in past tense," she ordered tensely. "We don't even know if they're victims."

"Haku and Neru, too," Gumi said emotionlessly. "They had pretty hair."

Rin refused to listen to her and slammed her hands against the window on either side of Gumi's head. Gumi stared at her with vague interest. Rin was shaking as she glowered at Gumi. Through gritted teeth, she growled, "Stop it. Don't act like this. This is why"

"Why you hate me?" Gumi retorted sharply, anger sparkling in her gaze.

Rin looked satisfied for a moment, seeing life in Gumi's gaze for once, but she soon returned to anger. "Yes, Gumi, I hate you. But there's only one reason I can hate you."

"Liar," said Gumi, turning her head away. "I'm easy to hate. I'm a liar, I overreact on a regular basis, all I do is make you cry, I'm not a good enough friend to be there for you or Iroha or Miku, I'm selfish, everything is always someone else's fault—"

"Shut up, Gumi!" said Rin, tears twinkling on her cheeks. "I don't care how many faults you have!"

"Rin, I'm tired," said Gumi, turning back to the window. "Go away now."

"Gumi, I'm trying to talk to you," said Rin, frustrated and saddened. Gumi couldn't be bothered to care.

"I don't feel like talking." Again, she laughed coldly. "I never feel like talking, right? There's another reason."

"Gumi, if I really hated you that much, would I really be here, everyday, trying to be with you even though you've been completely ignoring me?"

"I don't know. I assumed you were just trying to get Len's attention."

"Not everything is about Len, Gumi!" Rin grabbed Gumi by the shoulders and, with a strength Gumi never knew she had, pulled Gumi off the chair she had been sitting on beside the window. Then, Rin pulled her over to the bed and pushed her onto it. Then, Rin held her down, keeping her hands on Gumi's shoulders as she loomed over her, leaning so that her hair stretched toward Gumi as Gumi's hair fanned across the bed. Gumi stared at her, completely astonished. Rin was being so forceful. She'd never seen Rin like this. She couldn't help but stare, wide-eyed, into Rin's teary eyes. Rin stared at her and said, "Gumi, there's only one reason that you could make me feel so much, that you could hurt me so much. No one else could hurt me as much as you have, and no one else could make me cry so many times. No one else could make me hate every moment of my life when I'm not with you."

Gumi stared at Rin, completely at a loss. Rin's tears fell onto Gumi's faces as they stared at each other. Staring straight at her, Rin spoke her next words with such force and power that Gumi had absolutely no way to react.

"I love you."

Author's Note: (Written on Saturday) So much drama for me today. I watched the last half of Angel Beats, read the last chapters of Shugo Chara, watched Draw with Me by Mike Inel on Youtube, and read the end of Burned by Ellen Hopkins. Then I decided I should write this so I'd have a chapter to put up Monday. Sigh. I'm worn out. Finally, one of the scenes I've had planned from the beginning! Rin's confession! I don't know why, but I just always felt she should say it. I meant to have her seem more mature and together than Gumi, so I figured she'd work better to say it, even if she's the uke. Oh, and now missing Iroha goes to a whole new level. I love my kitty girl. I also really like writing about Kiyoteru, even though I've never heard any songs by him (other than Magnet with Kaito). This chapter is longer than usual, but next chapter is gonna be shorter than usual. It's a give and take thing. *shrugs* Oh, and the reason Rin completely ignored the comment about Len cheating on her (last chapter) is because she kind of knew in a sense, plus she really didn't care about Len at that point. So, please review and all that jazz (did I really just say that?).

21. I Don't Need Words that Break the Silenc

Chapter Twenty-One

I Don't Need Words that Break the Silence

"I love you!" cried Rin, pouring out her heart and soul, finally, after so many years of loving Gumi in secret. She leaned over Gumi on the green-haired girl's bed and searched for answer in her green gaze. But Gumi just stared at her in silence, unsure what to make of it. Rin couldn't find any other words to say, so she simply stared at Gumi, waiting for a response from the shattered girl.

Gumi slowly spoke. "I love you too, Rin," she said. "You're the best friend a girl could ask for."

Rin felt her heart breaking. No. No no no. She wasn't going to be rejected, not after all this time. At least, not unless Gumi knew she was rejecting her. Rin couldn't go back to having her feelings hide away from Gumi, to keeping her love a secret. She shook her head vigorously. "Not like that, Gumi."

Gumi frowned. "Then how?"

Rin stared at her, struggling for words. "L-like, like how boys and girls are supposed to feel about each other."

Gumi laughed, and each laugh felt like a strike to Rin's heart. "You do know neither of us are boys, right?"

"I know that," argued Rin. "But I still—"

"You love Len, Rin," insisted Gumi. "Everyone can see that."

Rin couldn't give up, not now. She was so close. She just had to make Gumi understand that she really did love her, and not in a platonic way. "No, I

don't, Gumi. I *like* Len, like girls like boys, but I don't love him. You're the only one I've ever loved."

Gumi grew more forceful as she shook her head and insisted, "No, you don't. I'm a girl, Rin."

"I don't care," refused Rin. "I love you, Gumi."

"No, you don't," said Gumi forcefully. Her voice grew weak again as she murmured, "Please, Rin, don't tell me you love me, because I know you don't mean it, not in that way. You're just confused right now. There's a lot going on, I understand. You don't really love me."

"Yes, I do!" cried Rin, despite Gumi's request. She had to make Gumi believe her. She loved Gumi, and she truly meant it. Why couldn't Gumi just see? "I love you and only you, Gumi!"

"Listen to me, Rin!" shouted Gumi, closing her eyes and shaking her head, fighting against Rin's grip.

"No, I won't, Gumi!" exclaimed Rin, pushing her back down. "I can't! I love you so much, Gumi! Please, just accept my feelings! You don't have to love me back! Please, just listen to what I'm telling you and know that I love you, and that I feel nothing like that for Len."

Gumi opened her mouth to argue again, so Rin closed her eyes and covered Gumi's mouth with her own, knowing it was the only way to convince her. She felt herself melting into Gumi. It was so different from when she'd kissed Len. With Gumi, it felt so perfect, so right, like it had always been meant to be. With Len, it had been perfect, but it was too perfect. Here, with tears covering their faces and making the kiss taste like salt, it felt exactly right, and it was nothing Len could ever give her.

Rin pulled away, dropping tears on Gumi's cheeks as Gumi stared up at her in utter shock. Rin braced herself for shouting, for Gumi to tell her how disgusted she was, and that Rin was sick, and that she never wanted to see her again.

Instead, Gumi smiled sadly.

"But if you've loved me all this time," Gumi said softly, "and I've always loved you, then what have we been doing all this time?"

Rin stared at her for a moment, trying to decide if she'd heard her right. Then, a laugh escaped her lips and her eyes shone with joy. Gumi loved her. She loved her. Gumi loved her, just as Rin had loved her all this time. Rin bowed her head and she laughed, her hair brushing against Gumi's neck.

"Who knows?" she replied, dropping more tears onto Gumi and smiling so wide it hurt.

Gumi laughed with her, and they stood there for quite a while until Rin lifted her head up and stared at Gumi. Gumi's hair was a mess, black smudges from mascara tears had left her entire face sticky, and dark bags had formed under her eyes from all the nights she'd been unable to sleep. Still, she was the most beautiful girl Rin had ever seen.

Rin couldn't control herself as she lowered herself onto Gumi to kiss her again. Their breathing grew ragged as they kissed, too involved in one another to remember how to breathe. Rin's arms ached from supporting herself, but she couldn't feel them anymore. All she felt was Gumi's body against hers. She sucked in a sharp breath between kisses and moved herself closer to Gumi, dissatisfied by the mere centimetres between them. She wanted to be closer, closer, closer, as close as she could get.

Then, Gumi put her hand between their mouths. Rin froze and stared at her, a question in her gaze. Gumi smiled cryptically and gently pushed Rin off her. Rin moved reluctantly aside as Gumi stood up and left the bed. Rin watched her go curiously, the curiosity intensifying as Gumi started shuffling through a drawer.

Rin busied herself studying Gumi's slender figure. Gumi's waist was tiny and her entire body was well-toned from all the sports she did, and her stomach was flat from a well-planned diet. Her chest wasn't incredibly flat like Rin's, and her legs were long and slender, accented by the black

leggings she wore under her jean skirt. Rin could see Gumi's pink bra strap beside the straps of the tight-fitting black spaghetti-strap top she was wearing, and she immediately grew self-conscious of the flowery blue top and jeans that she was wearing. Gumi looked so much more grown up than she did.

Gumi turned abruptly, and Rin's entire face went red. Gumi didn't notice and shook a bottle of nail polish, gazing at Rin to see if she understood. Rin nodded immediately, glancing at the nails Len had insisted she paint yellow. Gumi sat beside her on the bed and took one of Rin's hands in her own. It took all Rin had to sit there patiently as Gumi covered the yellow with green when all Rin wanted to do was kiss her again and again. Gumi smiled at the other girl, noticing her impatience, but Rin couldn't bother to hide it and just smiled tensely at the other girl, struggling to control herself.

After the agonizing minutes it took for her nails to dry, Rin wrapped her arms around Gumi's neck and buried herself in Gumi's kisses. She felt Gumi's fingers fumbling with the edge of Rin's shirt, so Rin pulled herself away for a second. She stared at Gumi for a second, unsure and suddenly incredibly nervous, and Gumi met her with the same expression, too afraid to ask for what she wanted in fear of chasing Rin away. Rin took a shuddering breath and lifted her top over her head. She threw it aside and stared at Gumi, who smiled at her.

Gumi stood up at that moment, leaving Rin wondering, again, what she was doing. Then, Gumi turned the lock on her door, closed her blinds, and shut off the light.

Author's Note: On account of this story is rated T, we'll stop here, and this chapter is thus shorter than the rest. And Gumi's parents aren't home, if you were wondering. Her dad's at work and her mom is looking for a new house for her and Gumi. Len (who has been gone for the last while) is simply sitting alone in Rin's room, twiddling his thumbs (okay, maybe not twiddling his thumbs). Oh, and Gumi's brother is home. I wonder if he's a yuri fan In my chapter summaries (which is like how I plan the story out), this chapter had the

information "They are in Gumi's room, where the two proceed to, uh, you know." I sound so immature Yay, happy chapter! Right? Well we're still not at the end so obviously it's not gonna be that way for long.

22. I'll Show My Self that's Been Coloured

Chapter Twenty-Two

I'll Show My Self that's Been Coloured by Your Light

The next day at school, Luka and Gumi decided to sabotage Gakupo at his locker before classes started. Well, actually, Gumi did, and she dragged Luka along. Gumi had something that she'd wanted to set straight for a long time, and, today, she was feeling invincible. Today was the day she would finally set Luka up with the person she really want to be with.

"Gakkun!" shouted Gumi, jumped onto the taller boy's back and wrapped her arms and legs around him to keep herself up. She held on tight as, startled, he jerked backward, and she was nearly thrown off balance by her weight.

"Gumi, what are you doing?" he cried.

"I think she's drunk," replied Luka. "Nobody else could be so chipper in a time like this."

Gumi put a finger on her lip thoughtfully, suddenly remembering that the entire school was in a very sombre state right now, and offered, "I did have coffee this morning."

"That explains it," said Luka with an amused eye roll.

"Anyway," chirped Gumi, too excited to even try to match the school's current expectations for her. In a loud, confidential whisper, she announced, "Gumi has a secret."

"Oh no, she's referring to herself in third person," groaned Gakupo. "This isn't good."

"Definitely," agreed Luka.

"Shush!" hushed Gumi angrily. "Gumi wants to share her secret."

"Okay, Gumi," sighed Gakupo. "What's your secret?"

Gumi stared at Luka, her eyes glittering excitedly. She smiled and said, "Gumi's secret is that she knows Luka's secret."

Luka face immediately burned red as she shouted, "W-what do you mean? I have no secret! Are you sure you're not drunk, Gumi?"

"Gumi has a second secret," Gumi continued excitedly. "She also knows Gakkun's secret, and it's a good one."

"St-stop calling my Gakkun!" cried Gakupo in an attempt to change the topic of conversation.

"So, who wants to know the secrets?" Gumi wondered.

"No one!" shouted the purple-haired boy and the pink-haired girl.

Gumi pouted and leaped off Gakupo so that she could look at them both. "But Gumi has known them both so long. Gumi wants to share."

"No!" shouted the other two.

Gumi scowled at them and said childishly, "Well, too bad! Gumi's gonna share anyway, so, shush!" She cleared her throat and loudly announced, "Gakupo and Luka are in love!"

Passersby stopped to look at the small group as Gakupo and Luka both grew red. They both grabbed onto her and covered her mouth.

"What are you talking about?" cried Gakupo. "I don't like Luka!"

"Yeah, right!" agreed Luka. "Like I'd ever like Gakupo!"

"Gumi only said you were in love," Gumi said, her voice muffled. "Never did Gumi say Luka and Gakupo loved each other, and their quick denials

are pretty suspicious."

Luka and Gakupo froze, growing progressively more red. Gumi smiled at them proudly.

. . .

Gumi's cheerfulness was gone as she sat down in Rin's room for lunch. At least, to anyone but her, it was gone. On the inside, she was still bubbling with joy, which only intensified when she saw Rin. Rin had the same sullen mask on as Gumi did. After all, Iroha and Miku were still missing, possibly dead, so everyone would know something was off if Gumi or Rin came in smiling. Miki had her arms around one of Len's as she called Iroha on her cell phone, as she had every single lunch since Iroha had gone missing, even though everyone knew there would never be an answer. Len watched Gumi closely, making her grow uncomfortable. Had he realized something was up? A part of her wanted to gloat to him that Rin was hers now, and she'd gone even further with Rin than he ever had.

Rin wore dainty white gloves today, and, though Rin's bow wasn't present, Gumi knew that, under the gloves, Rin's nails were painted green. Gumi held back a smile and sat on the opposite side of the table to the others.

"Where are Luka and Gakupo?" wondered Rin.

"I set them up," Gumi said. "Those two have liked each other for years. They were just too stubborn to show it. And, with Miku and Iroha missing, they could really use each other."

"I think we all need someone to rely on right now," said Rin with a tender smile that disappeared as soon as Len glanced at her. But Gumi had seen it, and that was all that mattered. "So I think we should go see Piko tonight."

"That's a good idea," agreed Miki, though her voice was dull and lifeless. "He lost Iroha, too."

Gumi felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to look at Kiyoteru, who looked incredibly together. Maybe being a teacher made controlling your emotions easier. Gumi had no idea how he did it. "Can I talk to you about the math homework you forgot to hand in?"

Gumi nodded, understanding what he meant. "Sure, Hiyama-sensei." She smiled at the other three and said, "Be right back."

She followed Kiyoteru to the place he'd taken her before, heartbroken that she had to shake her head when he asked if she'd heard from Miku. Seeing the pain on his face only made it worse. He let her go after that, and she couldn't help but feel responsible for his grief.

When she returned to the table, Rin had moved her seat over to the side where Gumi had left her bento box. Gumi had to stop herself from glowing as she took her seat again. She felt Rin slip her hands into hers under the desk and squeezed it in return.

"So, Gumi, we're all gonna go see Piko after school, okay? We're gonna bus there," Rin informed her. "Do you need to call your mother?"

Gumi shook her head. Really, she should call her mother, but, as an act of defiance against being taken from Rin when they're only just been able to reveal their emotions, she'd blocked her mother's calls on her cell phone and, in return, refused to ever call her mother. "It should be fine."

Rin's brow creased in concern. "Are you sure? With everything that's going on, don't you think she should know where you are?"

"I'll just call my brother," Gumi replied irritably. She wanted nothing to do with her family. She never wanted to talk to any of them again. She smiled sweetly at Len and said, "Besides, we have a big strong man to protect us, right?"

"Of course," replied Len with a sickly sweet smile. "I simply must protect my magenta tulip, my blue rose, and my black bird."

Gumi wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Black bird? Is that supposed to be me?"

Len smirked. "Well of course. Who else?"

Gumi scowled. "Save it for someone else. I don't want any of your nicknames."

Len's smirk faltered. "Really?"

Gumi stared evenly at him. "Yup."

Len frowned. "Well, if you won't accept the name, I guess I cannot call you by that."

Gumi smiled sweetly. "Nope, you most certainly cannot."

"Pity."

"Sure is."

Gumi felt Rin grow a little tense beside her, but Rin didn't seem to be nearly as bothered as she once had been whenever Gumi and Len would argue. Gumi had to smile at this development, and she knew Len didn't miss it.

. . .

Piko's face was as pale as his hair. Gumi couldn't help but worry when she saw him. He looked absolutely terrible. Poor guy. He seemed to be taking it worse than Miki. Then again, Miki was so obsessed with Len that he probably felt like he'd lost Miki as well. Add on to that that Iroha had been his roommate and then Gumi felt awful for worrying so selfishly about herself. All she wanted to do now was take care of him.

Miki barely seemed to notice Piko, but Piko took full notice of her. He watched her, waiting for a word of comfort, but she was lifeless as she clung to Len for all she had. Piko's face grew every more sorrowful as he watched her. Gumi and Rin exchanged a glance, and Rin gave a small nod.

"Len, can you help me cook something for Piko?" Rin asked, taking Len's hand in her own to guide him to the kitchen area, still littered with Iroha's various Hello Kitty-related possessions. Len smiled at her and agreed easily, pulling his arm away from Miki, who watched him leave with a sort of quiet desperation in her eyes.

Now it was time for Gumi to do her part. She grabbed Piko's left hand and Miki's right and commanded them over to the couch, when she sat them next to each other. She proceeded to partake in a one-sided conversation about everything Piko had missed in school. Neither Piko nor Miki seemed to even be listening. Miki stared at Len like a child pulled away from its favourite toy, and Piko stared at Miki, looking worse than when they had first come in. Gumi began to be angered at Miki's obsession with Len, but she herself knew well enough that Len was nearly completely irresistible. A part of her still wanted him, but her love for Rin, her knowledge of what he had done to Miku, and his knack for leading on poor girls like Neru, Iroha, and Miki overpowered that emotion and left her feeling disgusted as she watched him in the kitchen area with Rin as they moved some of Iroha's stuff.

The rest of the night, Gumi spent her time trying to get Miki and Piko to talk to each other, but neither was up to it. Rin and Len remained in the kitchen until dinner was ready, and, even then, they sat together. Gumi didn't mind though. Rin was hers now. She had nothing to worry about.

Author's Note: Take that, Len! Muahahaha! Find the oxymoron in this chapter and get a cookie! Gumi at the beginning is how I act when I've had caffeine or when I'm really tired. I tried to keep normal pairings out of this fic but, I dunno, I didn't want to enter anymore characters, and I wasn't gonna pair Luka (or Gakupo) with Kaito since he's a teacher and that's already happened once in this fic. Mm, for once I don't have much to say because I have to censor myself to avoid giving spoilers. Poor Kiyo-kiyo. I have a certain fondness for him, probably because he's not very popular as a Vocaloid. Alright, the rest of my author's note has been removed to avoid spoilers. Oh, wait, one last thing. People seemed disappointed by the fact that I didn't do the

explicit scene last chapter, and, I'm sorry, but I simply can't bring myself to write it. It's not because it's yuri (I'm bi, so I can go either way, really). I just can't write that kind of stuff because *turns away* None of your business, okay? *pout* But, seriously, if anyone feels like continuing that scene and posting it, let me know so I can go check it out! Not to sound like a perv Mm, kay, that's all. Bye bye.

23. If We Go Search for Happiness

Chapter Twenty-Three

If We Go Search for Happiness

Rin, Gumi, and Len awaited their bus at the station downtown. Miki had stayed behind at Piko's for the night, which was best considering how unsafe it would have been for her to be walking home alone at a time like this. Rin was so worried about her, living downtown. She came to school alone, too. It couldn't be safe. However, there wasn't much she could do about it since Miki refused invitations to stay at Rin or Gumi's house.

Rin's hand was in Len's, even though she really only wanted to hold Gumi's hand. Ever since she and Gumi had started their secret relationship, Rin had completely lost her interest in Len. She felt awful to keep leading him on, but, truly, she was sort of afraid of Len. She was afraid to see what he'd do to Gumi if he found out. Not that she'd suspect him of doing anything *that* awful, but Len's dark, mysterious aura warned her to proceed with caution.

"Gumi!"

The two blonde teenagers turned to the source of the voice. Gumi tensed up and refused to acknowledge it. Rin smiled a little when she saw Gumi's brother coming toward them. How sweet. He didn't want her to go home alone. Rin wished she had a brother who cared for her that much.

"Who's that?" Len wondered.

"Gumi's big brother," replied Rin, still smiling. "I guess he came to pick her up."

Gumi's eyebrow twitched in irritation. "Well I don't want him to pick me up. I'd more soon accept Len's protection."

Len smirked at her. "Oh?" he wondered.

Gumi scowled at him, disgusted, and let out a frustrated noise. Immediately as her brother approach them, she grabbed him and tugged him along. "Let's go," she barked. "Bye, Rin."

Rin giggled at the brother's flabbergasted expression. "Bye."

Len pursed his lips. "How rude. She didn't say goodbye to me."

Rin giggled again and ruffled Len's hair, feeling herself grow red from coming so close to him. "That's because you two don't like each other, silly."

Len stared at her evenly. "Do *you* like me?"

Rin felt herself grow even more red and her smile faltered for a second. "Oh. Of course."

Len frowned at her. "Then kiss me."

Rin blinked at him, unable to react. She couldn't kiss him, not without being disloyal to Gumi. So, instead, she frowned and said, "You can't just order me to kiss you. Anyway, this is a public place."

Len stared at her coldly. "Fine," he said icily, turning away.

Rin felt herself blanch. He was catching on. She wouldn't be able to keep her relationship with Gumi a secret for long.

. . .

"Heya," said Gumi as she took a seat next to Gakupo at lunch. Rin felt a little jealous. She wanted to sit beside Gumi, but Len had taken possession of her hand and didn't seem to be ready to release it anytime soon.

"Hey," said Rin. "What's up?"

"Not much," replied Gumi. "Just getting harassed about schoolwork by Hiyama-sensei again."

"He really has started taking an interest in you lately," commented Gakupo.

Gumi smiled, though it looked fake to Rin, which made Rin start to wonder. "He's probably just upset that I'm bringing down the grade's average."

"That *would* make sense," replied Gakupo with a smirk. Gumi punched him in the arm with a scowl, and he laughed. Then, he turned to Rin. "Where's Miki today?"

Rin shrugged. "Dunno. She wasn't doing well last night. She probably stayed home with Piko." Though she tried to sound nonchalant, she knew everyone could hear the worry in her voice. Miki wasn't answering her phone, and Piko had informed Rin that Miki wasn't there when the yellow-haired girl had called minutes ago. Still, Rin refused to jump to conclusions. Miki could have just gone home sick and fallen asleep, and that was why she wasn't answering. So, Rin continued, "Where's Luka?"

Gakupo's face went bright red and he began tripping over his words. "I-I don't know, why should I know, I don't know!"

Rin blinked at him and then smiled, amused, making his face go brighter.

"No, not like that! It really wasn't! Sh-shut up!"

Len raised an eyebrow at the other boy. "My, you don't waste any time, do you?"

"Sh-shut up, guys, I mean it!" hissed Gakupo.

Gumi smiled. "Oo, Gakupo's gettin' some."

"I said shut up!" he snapped, his face a brighter red than Rin's had ever been.

"Gumi," came Kiyoteru's voice as he came up behind her. Rin almost wanted to chase him away because she could see on Gumi's face as her smile fell that talking to him was the last thing she wanted to do right now,

and Rin saw pain flickering in Gumi's green eyes. Gumi turned to face him all the same. "I need to talk to you," he continued.

Gumi sighed and stood up, following him out of the classroom. Normally, Kiyoteru would take her far away, but, today, he only took her outside the door. Rin, Len, and Gakupo watched them curiously as Gumi's expression turned from resigned grief to shock to undeniable heartbreak as she grabbed the teacher by the shoulders and shouted at him, tears trickling down her face. She continued to shout at him as he answered her questions until, finally, she released him and wiped off her face on her sleeve. Then, she bowed respectfully to him as she apologized. She then reentered the classroom to find everyone staring at her. With as much composure as she could manage, she passed on the news.

"The school just got a call. In an alley, not far from where she gets on the train every morning, Luka's body was found. She was poisoned and all her hair was taken. She was still alive when they found her, but . . . but" Gumi sniffled and choked on her own tears before she finally managed to say, "She's dead."

. . .

The four students all returned home after that. Gakupo had gone home, and Len had decided to go with him to make sure he got there safely. Rin and Gumi had both gone to Rin's house, and, now, Rin sat on her bed, staring at her reflection in the vanity mirror, as Gumi, downstairs, explained the situation to Gumi's parents. Rin's cat bumped its head against her arm, purring in an attempt to comfort her, but she simply ignored it.

Dead. Luka was dead. They'd found her body. And, if they'd found hers, how long would it be until they found Haku's or Neru's or Iroha's or Miku's? And what about Miki? Was that what had happened to Miki, too?

Why hadn't it been Rin? Why wasn't she the one dead? What had she done that made her so worthy of living? Rin stared at her hair in the mirror. Of course. The killer was after beautiful hair, and Rin's was anything but beautiful. Gumi's hair wasn't that great, either, and Rin felt a moment of

selfish joy as she thought about that. Gumi would be safe, right? But what if the killer noticed Gumi's beauty like Rin had? What if the killer decided to take Gumi next?

When Gumi came into the room, she found Rin hyperventilating as she stared at her own reflection. Rin knew she was whispering something over and over, but she had no idea what it was. Gumi rushed over to her side as Rin collapsed forward, hiding her face in her hands as she murmured the same phrases over and over again through tears. Then, through all of it, she listened to Gumi's strong, confident voice.

"It's okay, Rin," she heard the green-haired girl say. "It's all going to be okay. I'm here for you. I'll protect you."

But, still, Rin kept repeating the words, over and over again, until Gumi silenced her with a kiss. When Gumi pulled away, Rin wrapped her arms around her neck and pulled her back into the kiss, refusing to let her only source of comfort move away. Gumi didn't resist as Rin searched for the comfort Gumi offered.

Then, Gumi was pulled abruptly off her. Rin heard her let out a short shriek and immediately jumped to her feet. She opened her eyes to Len, his eyes flashing with an unadulterated rage that made Rin cower in fear as he glared at her, pulling Gumi back with a tight grip on her arm. Gumi winced in pain and tried to pull away, but Len's grip didn't waver no matter how much she struggled.

"What are you doing?" Rin shrieked at him.

"I should ask you that!" shouted Len, his dark eyes flashing with a cruelty that petrified Rin. "You're meant to be with me!"

"Let her go!" shouted Rin. "You're hurting her!"

"I'm fine, Rin," huffed Gumi, trying to pry herself from Len's invincible grasp. "Just get yourself out of here. He's not safe."

Something had obviously broken in Len as he pulled Gumi sharply toward him, forcing her to face him. "*I'm* not safe?" he spat. "I'm all Rin could ever want! I'm the one who's protected her all this time, and you think you have the right to just take her away from me?"

"Rin has always been mine!" hissed Gumi. "She's always loved me and only me, and I've always loved her and only her! She'd never been yours!"

Len laughed coldly. "That's what you think, Gumi. But she's always been mine. I'm irresistible. All I have to do is ask."

Gumi glared up at him. "Get over yourself."

"It's not an exaggeration," Len snapped. Something flashed in his gaze, and he ordered her, "Kiss me. Now."

Rin felt her legs grow weak as she could do nothing but watched as Gumi's expression changed, just a tad, and she kissed Len, full on the lips, without a single resistance or word of complaint. Then, when she was pulled away, horror and disgust added to her expression. Len's expression remained fuelled with anger as he smirked.

"You see?" he growled. "Even you can't resist me."

Gumi's eyes sparkled with angry tears as she shook her head at him. "I can kiss you all you want, but I'll never want you the way I want Rin."

Len grew immediately more angered and Gumi screeched as his grip tightened. Len dragged her across the room, and she clawed at him with all her might, but he reacted to none of the blows she inflicted. In her struggle, she tore off one of his sleeves, but he still had no reaction as he shoved her out the door, slamming it shut behind her. Gumi screamed for Rin as she banged with all her might against the door that Len locked shut. Then, Len turned to Rin, who stood there, terrified, as she stared back at him.

"I'm tired of waiting for you," he growled through gritted teeth. "I've tried playing nice and waited for you to come around, like Miku or Iroha, but

you just won't realise that I'm the one you really want."

Rin, meanwhile, stare at the tattoos on his right arm, which were visible now that Gumi had torn off his sleeve. Tentatively, slowly, cautiously, she walked toward him. He stared at her tensely, trying to figure out her motive. Then, she rolled up his other sleeve and began on his left arm, pointing to each tattoo as she ran from the one on his wrist to the one furthest up.

"There's an indigo sunset, a red lily, a yellow cherry blossom, a green pumpkin, a crimson cactus, a grey daffodil, a purple fox, a white strawberry, and a magenta tulip," she stated calmly. Then, she went to the other arm. "Then, on this arm, there's a saffron snowflake, a burgundy sun, a sapphire ribbon, a brown wolf, an aqua fan, a violet bow, a pink moon, and this." She pointed at the outline of a rose, a tattoo yet to be completed. The edges had a hint of blue. He stared at her evenly as she continued.

"When I met you, it only went up to the grey daffodil and the aqua fan. Why did you get more?" It was a rhetorical question, and Len knew that, so he said nothing. Rin continued.

"You never really call any girls but me and Gumi by our first names. You called Neru purple fox, Haku violet bow, Iroha white strawberry, Miku pink moon, and Miki magenta tulip." She tilted her head curiously, currently oblivious to Gumi's shouting, joined by that of Rin's parents, outside the door. Right now, everything was her and Len. "You called Luka emerald wave, you tried to call Gumi black bird, and you call me blue rose. Why do you have tattoos of the nicknames you gave Iroha, Miku, and Miki? And why is a blue rose forming?"

Len simply stared at her, and Rin knew he wouldn't respond, so she questioned, "What does the tattoos mean, Len?"

Len smirked at her, that same smirk he gave everyone, only, now, it was filled with cruelty worse than any Rin had ever witnessed in her life. Len grabbed her by both wrists and pulled her toward him. Then, their faces inches apart, he told her, "It means you're mine."

Then, everything went black.

Author's Note: Ladida, one of the first things I ever had planned. I'm glad I finally got to write it 3 I'll be putting a list of who each tattoo stands for at the end of the story. I'm surprisingly upbeat after writing this. Now, to clarify this (because whenever I would discuss this point until now with my darling Vicki-chan, she'd say "He's not my type, I wouldn't be attracted to him"), it's absolutely *impossible* to resist Len, whether you want to or not, though he's made that point already. Please look at the "fantasy" part of the genre. You can hate him with all your heart, like Gumi, but if he wants you to want him, you can't help but want him. Ugh, finally. Take that, Vicki-chan. Oh, and, if you think the chapter title is unfitting, it's because it was meant to be like "If we go search for happiness, Len will come and **** things up."

24. In This Small Room

Chapter Twenty-Four

In this Small Room

At the time, Gumi was seven. Like any little sister, she admired her older brother more than anyone else in the world, even more than her parents. Then again, Gumi, even at the age of seven, felt nothing toward her parents. They were always arguing, and it was her brother who took care of her, really. Her mother hated that. She hated Gumi being with her brother, stating that he was a horrible influence, that he took after her father. Gumi didn't care. Nothing anyone said could change her opinion on her brother. That's why she always kept the plastic pocket watch he'd given to her one Christmas with her at all times, no matter how much her mother hated the clicking you could hear come from it when everything was quiet.

Then, one night, her image of him was shattered.

Gumi's parents weren't home that night. Gumi couldn't remember where they had gone, but she knew that her brother had left too, though, but he had told her not to tell their parents. So Gumi sat in her room, diligently drawing a picture she planned on giving to him when he got home. She was in such a deep state of concentration that her tongue was sticking out as she attempted to perfectly capture her brother's essence.

When Gumi looked up from the drawing, it was dark outside. The sun had set completely, and her clock told her that it was about time she went to bed. Gumi frowned. Her brother should have been home by now, shouldn't he? She couldn't sleep when no one was home.

Gumi changed into her pyjamas as she waited for her brother to come home and looked once again at the picture she'd drawn for him, making sure it was absolutely perfect. She was quite satisfied with it and gave a small nod with a proud smile.

Then, she heard the front door opening. She beamed and grabbed the picture. Her brother was finally home! He'd be so proud of her drawing. She dashed out of her room and came to the top of the stairs.

"Big brother!" she called eagerly.

He didn't notice her. He was so tense as he came in the house that Gumi immediately shut her mouth, her instincts telling her to stay quiet.

She knew staying quiet was a good choice when three burly men followed after her brother, entering the house without a single word of thanks. Gumi wanted to scold them as they walked in, dragging their filthy shoes across the clean floor, but she knew to stay silent.

"So," said one of the men. "Where's the money?"

Gumi's brother said in a quavering voice, "I have no idea."

"Cut the crap," snapped another man. "Where's the money you owe us?"

"I said I don't know," replied Gumi's older brother weakly.

Then, his breath broke into a wheezing as the previous man slammed his elbow into her brother's stomach. Then, he grabbed Gumi's older brother by his hair and slammed his head against the wall. Gumi bit down hard on her tongue to stop herself from joining her brother's scream. What were they doing? They were going to hurt him!

Meanwhile, another man noticed Gumi. He brought her to another man's attention, gesturing at her with a minimal movement. Gumi felt her heart speeding up in panic as she stared back at them.

"You tryin' to tell me you don't know where your parents keep the money?" the violent man growled. "You think we're idiots?"

"N-not at all!" stammered the smaller boy.

"Then show us where the money is, or my face'll be the last thing you ever see."

Gumi could see her brother gulp, but she was too terrified to do anything to help him. Then, her heart threatened to explode when the man who'd noticed her spoke.

"Well, if he doesn't know where it is, maybe the shrimp does," said the man.

The one who'd attacked Gumi's brother growled, "What they hell're you talkin' about? You wanna die too?"

"I mean the scum's little sister," snapped the man. "At the stairs."

All eyes turned to Gumi. Gumi stared at her brother, whose face was dripping blood as the man held a tight grip on his hair. He stared at her hopelessly as Gumi waited for him to tell her what to do.

Then, a sick grin played on the leader's face. "Well, now, isn't this convenient. Come down here, little girl."

Gumi continued to stare at her brother helplessly, waiting for his help, but he gave her no sign as of what to do. So, tentatively, she made her way down the stairs. Then, a man grabbed her arm tightly. She let out a short-lived screech before a hand clamped over top of her mouth, blocking the sound from leaving her lips.

"So, kid, you sure you don't have the money?" the man said.

Gumi stared at her brother, waiting for him to save her. Instead, he stared at her, completely lost. Then, he turned to the man, and said, "I'll go look."

The man bared his teeth in a grin and growled, "You'd better."

Then, he released the scrawny boy, who fell immediately to the ground. Gumi's brother looked at her, who, teary-eyed, murmured past the hand covering her mouth, "Big brother."

He was pushed forward by one man and then fled into the house. Agonizing minutes passed as Gumi waited for him to give the men what they wanted so they'd let her go. He would be back, soon, with the money.

And he did come back. Only, he was empty-handed.

"You think this is a joke?" snapped the man.

"I really don't know where the money is!" insisted the scrawny boy. Then, he looked at Gumi. "But she does."

"Are you serious?" questioned one man.

"Of course," said Gumi's brother assuredly. She stared at him as he kneeled down in front of her so that they were on eye level. "Gumi, you know where mom and dad keep their wallets, right?"

Gumi nodded weakly, waiting for him to comfort her, but he didn't. He just continued on.

"I need you to go get them for me, okay?" he requested.

"But I'm not supposed to," Gumi sniffled.

"I need you to, okay, Gumi?" her brother requested.

Because it was him, and only because it was him, Gumi agreed and was released by the man. Then, she ran upstairs, straight into her parents' room. She remembered seeing her parents with their wallets before. There was a drawer under the bed that they put them into. Gumi went down on her hands and knees and scooted across to floor under the bed until she found the drawer. She opened it and pulled out two black leather wallets. It was hard to get out while carrying them, but she did it and ran downstairs to her brother. She handed them to him and gripped onto his pant leg for protection, gazing at the scary men, who were completely focused on the wallet as her brother took out all the money with shaky hands and passed it over to one of the men. The man examined it and glared at her brother.

"You kiddin' me? This ain't enough!" he growled.

"It's all I have!" insisted Gumi's brother. Desperately, he grabbed Gumi and shoved her toward the man. She turned to him, confused and terrified, as he said, "Here, take her. Just take her until I can pay you back."

"Big brother!" cried Gumi in disbelief. He was *selling* her? What if they didn't give her back? What if he could never get the money? What would they do to her then?

"You screwin' with us?" growled another man.

"No," the leader said to the two other men. "She'll be plenty till he can pay us. Then we'll come get our money back, and, if he doesn't have it, we'll kill the twerp *and* him."

Gumi's eyes widened in horror. *Kill* her? They would *kill* her?

No. No!

Gumi bolted as fast as she could up the stairs, so quick and nimble that the men had barely taken a step by the time she reached the top of the stairs. She stared around herself desperately, trying to find somewhere to hide. There was a small closet open. The closet was divided into five shelves filled with linens along with a laundry basket on the ground, filled with clothes. It was just big enough for Gumi to fit in.

Gumi could hear them following her and knew she had no other choice. She dashed into the closet, closing the door behind her, and fell into the laundry basket, her hip aching as it banged against her pocket watch, which banged against the wall. She scrambled to make the clothes cover her from all visible angles in the darkness. They would open the door eventually, but maybe they wouldn't notice her if she hid herself.

She heard them outside the door. They were upstairs now, searching for her and yelling at her brother. She heard multiple doors slamming and heard many things fall to the ground and shatter. She felt herself crying and bit

down on her tongue to stop herself from making a noise. She heard the door to the closet shake, but it didn't open. The loud search continued for what seemed like an eternity. Then, they left.

Everything was quiet. Everything was dark. Gumi felt completely alone in the darkness. All she could hear was a weird clicking. The clicking just kept going rhythmically, whispering in her ear. What was the clicking? Gumi's brother had once told her that a human's heart clicked away every second as it counted down to their death. Gumi hadn't believed him. After all, she couldn't hear her heart. But, was that what the clicking was? Could she hear it because she was close to death?

Click click click. There wasn't a single noise in the house other than the clicking and Gumi's breathing. But Gumi's breathing was growing louder and louder. Was she fighting to draw in air? Was this room so small that she was running out of air to breathe? She had to get out of the closet or she wouldn't be able to breathe soon.

Click click click. The clicking seemed to be moving closer to her. It made no attempt to silence itself and instead grew louder in her ears. What if it was dangerous? Gumi had to get out of this closet, away from the ticking and into the air. It had been quiet for so long that the men must have been gone by now.

Gumi slowly moved the clothes off herself and stretched for the doorknob. It was too tiny for herself to even sit up in this room. She grabbed onto the cold knob, turned, and pushed.

The door didn't move.

Gumi's breathing started growing ragged. She tried again, but the door stayed shut. It wouldn't move. Gumi opened her mouth to scream but couldn't remember how. Instead, she sat there, staring at the door that was just as black as everything else, as the clicking grew louder and louder in her ears, ticking off the time she had to live before it would lay claim on her and take her life.

A noise came from downstairs. Gumi didn't care who it was. She didn't care if it was one of those men. Anything was better than being in here. Gumi knocked on the closet door with all her might and screamed for help, finally remembering how. She felt the clicking grow louder and louder, closer and closer, knowing it had to get her now, fast, before another entered the darkness and it had to hide away again.

"Gumi?" came a voice outside the door.

"Let me out!" Gumi cried hoarsely.

"Gumi, it's okay, I'm gonna get you out of there!" said the voice reassuringly. "Where's the key?"

"I don't know," sobbed Gumi. "I didn't lock it!"

"Okay, Gumi, I'm gonna go look for it, okay? But I'm right here. I'll keep talking to you, okay, so just listen to my voice."

"Okay," said Gumi weakly.

The voice continued to narrate what it was doing as it searched for the key. Finally, it found it, under a pile of shattered glass from a fallen clock, and came back and opened the door. Gumi stumbled immediately out of the closet and into the arms of the voice's owner.

Long, blonde hair fell onto Gumi's shoulders as Rin stroked the other girl's head, murmuring comforting words in her ear as Gumi cried and struggled to explain what had happened. Rin sat there, listening to every gruesome detail, and stroked Gumi's hair. Afterward, Gumi would find blood in her hair from the cuts that laced Rin's hand from searching through the glass, and she would see that, beside where Rin had found the key, was a puddle of blood from Gumi's brother and a couple lost teeth. Afterward, she would see the horrible, crime-ridden house Rin, at seven-years-old, had bravely faced to come find her.

Afterward, she would come to love Rin and put the girl above all other things in her life, even herself.

Author's Note: Just so you know, due to Vicki-chan, I almost stopped writing the story (well, actually I refused to post until she accepted the facts). She still insisted she could resist Len. But then she consented that *in the story* he was irresistible, so I agreed to continue posting. (I'm such a child.) Oh, I also called him a seductive unicorn :) Yeah, so, muahahahaha because I'm evil you don't even get to see what happens with Len for like three chapters :) I'll also take this time to defend Miki by pointing out, again, that Len is a seductive unicorn. (Btw, he's not actually a unicorn. It's a metaphor, I guess. A weird one.) Oops, um, I guess this is sort of a cliffhanger due to the fact that you still don't know what happened to Rin and Len. Sorry, OtakuGirl347. Also, I know this chapter seems like I stole it partially from Angel Beats but I had this written when I wrote the Halloween chapters so it was before I watched that show! So it's not intentional! Mm, and, if you didn't make the connection, the clicking was the pocket watch her brother gave her. Also, Rin is comforting Gumi for once, yay! And this chapter explains why Gumi's brother seems to care about her so much when she hates him. He's spent the rest of his life trying to make it up to her for this but she'll never forgive him for something like that. Seriously, who would? Oh, and it was Gumi's brother who had locked the door to the closet so that the men couldn't get to her. That's why the key was near his blood. So, that's all till Monday. I also posted a random HakuxNeru oneshot and my Halloween fic goes up Sunday if anyone's interested. I'm still a yuri fan so writing yaoi is weird for me, but I have to be fair to all pairings. And, if you have a certain pairing you'd like me to write a fic for, feel free to request it :) Any pairings, straight, yuri, yaoi, or even something like Miki-Piko-Iroha in this story. Avoid the common pairings though, please. I wanna give other pairings some love.

25. Although I Don't Know Now, With This Mo

Chapter Twenty-Five

Although I Don't Know Now, With This Moment, I'll Leave my Heart to
You

Rin saw only darkness around her, but, now, finally, she had some knowledge of what was going on around her. Or, at the least, she was conscious. But her eyes wouldn't open, her limbs wouldn't move. Her body wouldn't obey her.

"That's stupid," Gumi's voice echoed in Rin's head. "That doesn't even make sense."

A younger Rin frowned at her as the older Rin watched the scene. "Don't be mean."

"Well it's stupid," younger Gumi, sitting cross-legged and unladylike on a carpet, in a circle with Rin and a few other students Rin recognized from their elementary school, repeated. "Obviously Rin should play the role of the princess, not me." Both Rins smiled at Gumi's comment, feeling their hearts warm.

"It was just a suggestion," grumbled Yuuma. Older Rin stared at him. She'd only ever been in Yuuma's class once, in the fourth grade. Oh, I remember this, Rin realized. Yuuma had decided to take charge of the group's play for their grade four recital. That must be what this was. "Most girls would want to be put in the role of the princess."

"Nuh uh, not me!" proclaimed Gumi, staring at younger Rin passionately. "I wanna be the knight who protects her beloved Princess Rin!"

"Gumi, you're so weird," the little Rin giggled as older Rin stared at the green-haired girl affectionately. It had always been so obvious. How had she never noticed?

Gumi smiled at her. "Yep, but I'm only weird for you, 'kay?"

The little Rin smiled back at her. "'Kay."

Rin's eyelids fluttered a little. It was an accomplishment, but she still couldn't manage to open her eyes before words echoed through her mind, a conversation between a younger Gumi and Rin.

"Rin! We just learned about where babies come from in class!"

"Oh, really?"

"Rin, I want you to be the mother of my children!"

"Why do I get the feeling you dozed off during the lesson?"

"I did, why?"

Rin wanted to smile, but she couldn't make her lips move other than the barest twitch. Her eyes still refused to open, and she couldn't move any of her body yet.

"No no no, Rin, you're doing it all wrong!" a preteen Gumi yelled.

A Rin of the same age, holding a hot chocolate in her hand, stared at Gumi curiously. The other girl stormed over to her and pulled the mug from her hand.

"It's gotta have peppermint or it's no good," Gumi scolded.

Rin laughed. "You're so serious about this."

"I am."

"Okay then, if it means that much to you, I'll only drink peppermint hot chocolate from now on, okay?"

"Yep, very good. And taiyaki must always be chocolate-filled, okay?"

"Whatever you say," Rin laughed.

"Swear?"

"Swear."

"Good. I'll hold you to that."

"Will do."

Rin had kept that promise all her life, as childish as it seemed. The thought made her happy, even though she was starting to feel a pain on the tips of her fingers as they began to feel like they were being frozen. Rin squeezed her eyes shut and tried to push away the pain as more memories of Gumi surfaced.

"Rin, I got you a present!" Gumi announced after school at Rin's locker. Rin stopped putting her books inside her bag and looked at Gumi cautiously. Gumi frowned at her. "What's with that look?"

"The thing you surprised me with ended up getting us kicked out of the mall for a week," Rin replied.

Gumi pouted. "Don't be a party pooper. It's completely safe."

"I don't know, Gumi," Rin replied, returning to her books. "With you, nothing is ever safe."

"It's just something cute, okay?" Gumi said. "C'mon, Rin, it's awesome! I saw it and I just knew I had to get it for you!"

"Right, okay," Rin said, shaking her head with an affectionate smile. "Wait until we get home, okay?"

"Aw, but I'm so excited!" Gumi whined.

"You will wait," ordered Rin, tapping Gumi on the forehead with her pencil.

"I will wait," Gumi repeated. "But I do not accept this abuse."

In response, Rin smiled and tapped Gumi's forehead again with the pencil.

The cold pain was spreading up Rin's arms and through her legs. For the moment, she was glad she couldn't control her body. If she could, she probably would have screamed or cried, even though she knew there was no point to that. After all, if she was dying, screaming would make no difference, right?

"So what is it?" Rin asked when they were inside her bedroom.

"Tadah!" Gumi proclaimed, holding out a gift-wrapped shoe box. "It's not shoes, by the way, this was just the only things I could find to wrap."

Rin took the box and examined the wrapping better. It didn't look incredibly professional, but the heart put into making it was evident. "Did you make the gift wrap, Gumi?"

"Uh huh," said Gumi, nodding. "It had to be perfect. That, and my brother sold all our wrapping paper. Don't know how far that'll get him but . . ."
Gumi shrugged. "Anyway, open it up! Now!"

Rin took her time unwrapping it, fighting to preserve Gumi's hard work, no matter how much Gumi told her to hurry up and just to rip the paper. Rin finally reached inside the box and pulled out a white bow. She gazed at it curiously.

Gumi beamed and ran over to her, taking the bow from Rin's hands and tying it into her hair. Then, she cried out, "Yes! I knew it! You look so adorable!"

Rin looked at herself in the vanity mirror. Her cheeks turned red. Sure, she looked adorable, but it made her look like a little kid. Still, Gumi liked it, so Rin did, too. Rin turned to Gumi and smiled.

"I'll wear it every day," she promised.

The pain was getting worse and worse. Rin's instinct told her to fight against it, but she couldn't. Now, even her eyes wouldn't obey her. Her mind was even starting to grow foggy and started pushing away thoughts of Gumi. Thinking of Gumi was too hard. It was so much easier to think about Len, the one she'd betrayed, the one who had been there for her when Gumi was gone.

Rin was alone in her room. Her cat lay curled up on the corner of the bed she'd never bothered to make. Her door was locked, her windows were firmly shut. The bow weighed heavy on her head, reminding her of Gumi and reminding her of how completely alone she was.

Then, she wasn't alone.

When she looked up, he was standing there. She didn't even feel shocked to see him there. Having him there felt necessary, natural. She stared at him and he smiled kindly at her.

"I'm Len," he said.

"Rin," she replied.

"Why are you alone?" he wondered.

"Because Gumi is gone," she replied, not even knowing why she did.

"Is that why you're crying?" he questioned.

"Yes."

"Would you like me to stay here with you for now so you don't have to cry alone?"

"Yes."

"Will Gumi be coming back?"

"No."

"Would you like me to come back so that you won't be alone?"

"Yes."

"Would you like me to replace Gumi?"

"No."

Len had looked a little disappointed at that, but he'd smiled all the same and sat beside her. "Well, maybe, some day, you will."

Rin had nodded, leading him on, giving him false hope, when she knew, no matter how deeply she fell for him, Gumi would always own her heart.

Rin forced herself to think of Gumi, no matter how hard it was. That was the day she'd broken the promise to Gumi. That was the day she'd started letting Len in. That was the day she'd brought her fate to this.

"Hey, Rin?"

Rin felt herself falling into another memory of Gumi as the pain grew unbearable. Her mind was growing so foggy that the memory was covered in a sort of haze, the voices muffled, but Rin knew it was Gumi in her memories, her and Gumi, years ago.

"Yeah, Gumi?"

"Can you promise me something?"

"Sure, what?"

"Promise me you'll never go falling for some guy. I'm never gonna get a boyfriend, so you can't either. Boys are trouble, so we gotta stay far away from them. Promise?"

"Yeah, I promise."

Rin finally felt herself smile at that last memory of Gumi. Before the pain made everything blur and vanish, taking Gumi far from her thoughts as slowly, slowly, the pain took over her entire body, Rin managed to form the words, "I'm so sorry, Gumi." Then, in a blessed moment of relief, it stopped, and Rin stopped feeling anything at all.

Author's Note: Did anybody remember the peppermint hot chocolate and the chocolate-filled taiyaki? That played a part in the time when Gumi finally spoke to Rin again at the beginning. Anyway, sorry this is short-ish. Too much schoolwork. Honestly, I have a four-day Thanksgiving weekend coming up (yes, I'm Canadian, but I also have many American friends, so don't harass me about whether or not it's the real Thanksgiving. I'm not saying it is or it isn't) and I have three unit tests and a project the day we get back. And I have to read an entire novel by that day. I also have a test Wednesday so if I don't update tomorrow, I'm sorry but it's because I'll be studying. Um, also, this story is reaching an end. Five chapters after this. I'm sad I *will* be posting side-stories and stuff after the story is through, though. Mm, alright, see you soon. Oh, and I'm still working on those requests. I have the plot all set up for all of them, I just gotta write it. Let me know if there's any more requested pairings because I'm havin' fun with these. Yeah I posted one of the requests, RinxLuka (btw a lot of requests were for Rin and someone). It's a totally silly story called Magical Girls Fall in Love! Read it if you're interested :) And I've started writing the RinxNeru one. I'm about halfway through.

26. I'll Probably be Forced into Your Cage

Chapter Twenty-Six

I'll Probably be Forced into Your Cage

Gumi absently rummaged through the fridge in the morning, still in her pyjamas. She couldn't quite remember where she'd put her school uniform, but she'd find it later. Instead, for now, she focused on food. She considered cooking a bento since she couldn't sleep anyway, but she was about as good as cooking as her brother. Well, actually, his cooking was pretty good, but he always failed to warn her about the unwanted ingredients he added that left her personality greatly altered for hours on end. Of course, she no longer had to worry about that. She never saw her brother anymore. After all, they didn't live in the same house now.

So, bento. Yes or no? Definitely no. Gumi could pick up something at the convenience store for the two of them for the day. She could go get it now, but it was still dark outside and she was in no rush to go out. So, instead, she figured she might as well look for her uniform.

After pointlessly searching every single crack of the house, other than the room whose door was still shut, as she attempted to kill time, Gumi went to the place she was most likely to find it. Of course, there it was. The laundry room. Her skirt and blouse had been ironed and now hung on hooks next to a black suit. Gumi momentarily considered wrinkling the suit, just for fun, but she simply couldn't muster the drive to go through with it.

After Gumi got herself ready for school, there wasn't much left to do. She rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet and stared into the fridge before closing it again. She looked at the clock and decided it was time to awaken the still-sleeping owner of the house.

However, she went to the door and found it open. She peeked inside and made eye contact with her new living partner. She smiled a little.

"Morning," she said.

"Good morning," replied Kiyoteru.

"I'm ready to go whenever. I didn't feel like making us bentos."

"That's fine, we'll just pick some up at the convenience store on the way."

"Kay."

With that, Gumi left her teacher alone and flopped down in front of the television to watch some early-morning cartoons, unable to leave the TV on the news to update her on the latest horrible news.

In the last month, many things had changed. Miki and Rin were announced as missing, along with Neru, Haku, Iroha, and Miku. Piko still wasn't coming to school, but he did tolerate Gumi coming over after school with take-out food and forcing him to eat. She didn't believe he would, otherwise. Gakupo had dropped out of school completely after Luka's funeral and now worked a part-time job, where Gumi would go visit him whenever possible and take him out to eat. Gumi seemed to have it the easiest. Though she'd lost her one true love, Rin, and a great many best friends, she'd managed to keep it together enough to care for the three men in her life.

The fighting had grown even worse at Gumi's house after the silence had faded, and she'd been unable to handle it anymore. Without a word to either her parents or her brother, Gumi had packed up her bags and left for school one morning, never to return. She'd gone to Rin's house and taken a few things of Rin's, like her ribbon that had been the only thing left after Rin's father had busted down the door. She'd also taken custody of Rin's cat. Now both Gumi and Rin's cat were staying in Kiyoteru's home, though no one but Gumi, Kiyoteru, and the cat were conscious of this. When Gumi had explained her situation to Kiyoteru, he'd been quick to allow her to stay. It was probably because she had been Miku's best friend.

Len had vanished completely that night. When the door had been knocked down, both he and Rin had been gone, and there was no sign as to where they'd gone. There were no breaks in the wall; the windows were still firmly

shut. Nobody knew what had happened. The police were looking into it, but Gumi knew they'd never find anything.

School was the worst part. Gumi was the only one of her friends still attending. The rest were either dead, missing, or had dropped out. Still, Gumi went, because Rin would have wanted her to. Rin had always wanted her to pursue a higher education, or at least finish highschool. So, even though she knew people gossiped about her all the time, even though she hated that everyone treated her with delicacy like she might blow up any second, even though she was sick of all the sympathetic gazes or crummy attempts at expressing their understanding for how she felt—like they could *ever* understand how she felt—she still went to school.

The next worst part was trying to sleep. Gumi constantly found herself haunted by visions of Iroha's last smile, of Miku's parting words, of Kiyoteru's mournful eyes, of Piko's gaunt cheeks, of Luka's love for her boyfriend, of Gakupo's painful realization that he'd lost the girl he'd just won, of Neru's refusal to leave Len without a fight, of Haku's dependant clinging onto Neru in the halls, of Miki's similar attitude toward Len in her final days, of the tattoos running along Len's arms, and, of course, of her last kiss with Rin. Over and over, the images played in her mind, and she thought again and again about the things she could have done to stop all this from happening, of the things she could have done to save them.

That day after school, Gumi went to the grocery store where Gakupo worked one of his part-time jobs. She chatted idly with him, carefully avoiding mentioning any of their friends. She asked him about the job, about the apartment he was renting, if he was making enough money, if he was eating, if he needed her to maybe come over one night. Of course, he acted as though nothing was wrong, though Gumi could clearly see how broken apart he was, and rejected any offers she made to help him out. In the end, he requested she leave so he could focus on his customers, and she had no choice but to leave.

From there, she went to Piko's. Unlike Gakupo, Piko didn't even try to put on a brave face. She had a key to his apartment, so she just entered, and she

found him staring at a picture of him, Iroha, and Miki. In the picture, Iroha was poking up behind Miki and Piko. Piko had his hand around Miki's waist, and Iroha's had one arm hugging Miki around the neck and one hugging Piko around the neck. Miki was holding one of Iroha's hands, as was Piko, creating a continuous flow from one of the students to the next.

Gumi plucked the photo from his hand and scolded, "Stop acting like they're dead. They'll be back any day now, just you wait and see."

"Iroha's been gone for months," Piko said drearily. "Miki's been gone for almost a month. They're not coming back."

"Rin's been gone, too, but I know she'll be back," Gumi replied. "I just know she will. If I didn't believe that, then why would I even bother continuing to try?"

"I don't think they're ever coming back," said Piko. "Maybe I should just kill myself and have it done with."

Gumi's eyes flashed in anger as she stared at the boy, who stared back at her with unfeeling eyes. "Even if you were to do that, do you think Iroha and Miki would be happy?"

"They'd want me to be happy," said the white-haired boy. "I'm not happy, so I have to try to make myself happy."

Gumi turned away from him. "You won't be happy if you kill yourself, Piko. You'll just be dead. Then, when Iroha comes back, she won't have a roommate."

"She's not coming back."

"She is. Just you wait and see."

Gumi couldn't look at him when he spoke next or she knew she would start crying. "How much longer do I have to wait?"

Instead, without looking at him, she replied softly, "I don't know, Piko."

After that, they didn't say much, just ate. Then, afterward, Gumi returned to her temporary home with Kiyoteru. When she went inside, she heard a stifled sob and knew what to expect. She dropped her grocery bags and school bag on the floor outside the door and locked it shut. Then, she made her way to Kiyoteru's room, when he sat on the edge of the bed, hunched over and crying. She sat next to him and comforted him the best she could, putting her arm around him and stroking his arm as his body shook. Kiyoteru had been hesitant the first few times she'd done this, but she knew it provided him some comfort and, now, on a certain level, he expected it. She sat with him and did her best to lessen his pain until, finally, he grew quiet. She then excused herself to go for a walk.

Gumi had to be there for everyone. She had to be there for Piko, for Gakupo, and for Kiyoteru. Honestly, she didn't mind being there for them, but she was in pain, too. She'd never been one to openly show her pain, and she no longer had Rin to depend upon when things got too rough, so, now, she was left with no outlet for her grief, no one to lean on. When she cried, she had to cry alone, because she had to be strong for everyone else. She had to be the grown-up, because she was the only one who could manage to do that.

Gumi found herself in the meadow where she and Rin used to play. She went here almost every day. She felt like, somehow, on some level, Rin was here. So, comforted by the sense that Rin was with her, Gumi left herself cry, quietly at first, then progressively louder. She clutched her arms tightly around herself as she hunched over the ground, the long grass brushing against her.

Then she felt something change in the atmosphere, and she grew quiet, forcing the tears to stop. She stared at the shoes in front of her and followed them up to see the face. Her heart jumped as she stared at it. Blonde hair blew in the wind and blue eyes locked on hers. She searched their gaze for a meaning, searching for an explanation, a reason.

Len.

They stared at each other for a long time, neither accepting defeat, simply staring at one another. Gumi hated looking at his face, the face that looked so much like Rin's, the face she'd seen contorted in such cruelty, in such hatred, before he'd taken Rin.

"Where is she?" Gumi asked him.

"She's safe," was all Len replied.

"Will you let me see her?"

"Perhaps. Are you lonely?"

It was like when he'd told her to kiss him. She couldn't say no. She simply found herself answering honestly, even if she didn't want to. "Yes."

"Would my company be sufficient?"

"Never."

"Pity. You're a strange one, you know that?"

Gumi stared at him, ignoring his comment. "What are you? You can't be human."

Len smiled a little. "I am as human as you are."

Gumi stared at him evenly. "Are you the killer?"

Len laughed a little. "Not at all. I'm quite disappointed he got my emerald wave before I could whisk her away to safety."

"Then what are you?" Gumi pressed on.

Len smiled at her. "That's not a question I can easily answer, but, I can tell you this: I am human. There's only one difference between me and your

everyday Joe."

"Which is?"

"I am God."

Gumi stared at him dubiously and retorted, "Right, because that totally makes you human."

"I am God, but not of this world. I discovered a new world, and made myself its God. Would you like to come to my world?"

"Is that where Rin is?"

"Yes."

"Then I would, but what are the conditions you no doubt have in mind?"

"You may be with Rin. You can spend every moment of every day with Rin. However, you may never have her in the way you want. After all, she is my blue rose. I can bring you to her, if you will be my black bird."

Gumi stared at him for a moment. "Take me to her."

"So you will agree to my conditions?"

"I will agree once I see her."

Len smiled triumphantly. "Very well then. Then come with me."

Len offered her a hand. Tentatively, Gumi took it. He tugged her to her feet and began to guide her up the hill. She followed him as he strolled straight into Rin's house, then into her room, which no longer had a door. Then, he gestured toward the vanity mirror invitingly. She gazed at him suspiciously, then walked to the vanity. She placed her hand on the mirror's surface, only to have it fall through. She pulled her hand back, startled. She looked at Len, who waited patiently for her to continue onward. Gumi reminded herself that Rin was on the other side of the mirror and stumbled inside.

Then, everything went black.

Author's Note: Oh, by the by, did anyone remember that the killer kills through poison? I never said Len wasn't a liar. Oh, and, because Vicki-chan once asked me this near the beginning, the reason Len is so interested in Gumi (perhaps more so than he is interested in Rin) is simply because she has a great strength in resisting him which he is totally not used to. And, fyi, I have mentioned the vanity mirror nearly every time they're been in Rin's room. Motifs, people! I've been doing an essay on rhetorical devices in the last couple weeks, is it obvious? Pfft, I thought I'd just write the first page and then get back to studying but studying is boring so I wrote the whole chapter. Oh well. Sooo, yeah. I'm gonna put a poll up later tonight for what chapter-story you'd like me to do next (descriptions for each story are gonna be in my profile. Some are up already but there's a few I never go around to putting up) if you really like my writing and plan on reading other stories by me. This kind of story is very much my style so this is how most of them will be. Y'know, seems light-hearted-ish to start then gets progressively more dark and confusing. So yeah. Um I'm tutoring for a while tomorrow and I don't have time to write another chapter tonight so tomorrow's update won't be until late-ish at night probably.

27. Maybe I'll Change Your Mind

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Maybe I'll Change Your Mind

"Blue rosie rose Rin Rin!"

Rin looked up from the flowers she'd been gazing at in a complete state of tranquillity and smiled at the smaller girl running toward her.

"You know only Len calls us those names, Iroha," Rin chided gently.

Iroha beamed at Rin, her cheeks rosy from her run over. "Yeah, I know, but Rin's a boring name to call out on its own."

Rin laughed. "You're crazy."

Iroha smiled. "Yep. Anyway, have you seen Len? I can't find him anywhere and I'm *bored*."

Rin rolled her eyes, amused. Iroha demanded Len's attention more than anyone else did, and, though they wished they could have more of his attention, the other girls didn't mind allowing her that.

"Hey, twerp, I get Len when he gets back, got it?"

A hand grasped Iroha by the head, and Rin couldn't help but giggle at the ridiculous difference in heights between Neru and Iroha as Neru glared at the smaller girl. Iroha pouted at Neru and began to whine. Neru proceeded to insult Iroha in every manner she could think of, making a very comical scene for Rin to watch.

As the two bickered, Rin gazed around herself. Everything was covered in a blueish haze. The area was a sort of swamp, with a large, blue expanse of water, long grass and mud, and great trees that had large roots sticking out of the ground. The leaves on the trees were almost all perpetually absent,

but that didn't bother Rin. They were still beautiful. A bird cage hung from the branch of one tree, far off. Though it looked tiny from here, the bird cage was actually quite large, big enough for a human to rest in comfortably. That was where Rin had been when she first arrived here, and the other girls agreed that the same had occurred with them.

The girls all had similar outfits, a lacy, doll-like dress that was white underneath and had black overtop, leaving some of the white showing. They had a belt that ran along their waists, and black ribbon poured from the matching boots they wore. A piece of white, lacy fabric, tied with a black ribbon in the centre, made a choker for each girl, and certain girls also had them around their wrists as bracelets. Each girl had a black headband, but what separated them from each other was the symbol found either on their headband or, in certain cases, elsewhere on their outfit, and their headband would have a large black ribbon.

Rin headband held a blue rose. Iroha's had a couple white strawberries. Neru's headband held only a black ribbon and, instead, a bushy purple fox tail tore through the back of her dress. Neru was quite proud of the tail, unless she ended up sitting on it. At those points, she would use many choice words Rin had never heard in her life until now.

"Neru, wait a minute!"

The three girls turned to Miku as she went to Iroha's other side. Iroha's eyes shone as she looked to Miku, waiting to be saved. Then, Miku smiled and said, "I wanna pick on jail bait, too!"

"Everyone's so mean to me!" Iroha wailed. "I'm sixteen!"

"Yeah right, shorty," laughed Miku. Miku's headband held a large pink crescent moon. Rin was surprised the ornament never threw her off balance.

"Now now, girls, let Iroha be before you make her cry," Miki scolded softly, smiling at the group as she brought herself to attention. Miki, with a magenta tulip on her headband, sat on a tree branch with Haku, whose headband contained a violet bow.

"Shut up, you, I'm gonna pick on her until she cries her eyes out!" Neru proclaimed.

"Rin, they're being mean to me!" whined Iroha, looking at Rin with teary eyes.

"Neru, please be nice," Haku said quietly.

Neru glared at her. Haku squeaked in shock and would have fallen off the branch had Miki not held onto her tightly. "What did you say?"

"Never mind," replied Haku.

"I thought so."

"Okay, Miku, Neru, leave her alone or I'm going to go get Tei," Rin threatened.

Miku's face blanched, but Neru only laughed. Tei was known for her obsession with Len that was much worse than the affection the other girls had for him and also for her hatred for Miku, which she'd failed to explain to anyone yet. Neru stopped laughing when she realized that, in wanting to take Len immediately after he got back, Tei would go psychotic on her and chase her up a tree for days on end, until she got bored. Everyone had learned to climb trees to escape Tei because the girl couldn't climb with a butcher knife in hand.

"Harassing shorty is not worth the terror," Miku said.

"Agreed," replied Neru.

"Everyone, Len's back!" called Mariam, who donned a red lily on her headband. The girls all looked up excitedly to Mariam's voice.

"Me first!" said Neru.

"Anyone want to let Tei know?" Miki giggled.

"Do it and we all die," replied another girl, Sonika, who wore a burgundy sun on her head, as she raced toward the bird cage along with all the other girls.

Then, when they got there, they saw he wasn't alone. Rin and Iroha had ended up at the back of the crowd, so Rin lifted Iroha onto her shoulders so that she could tell her what was going on.

"Well, she's new," said Iroha. "She's not going through it the same way we did, though. She's not converting. She's just got some temporary wings on. Oh, never mind, she took them off. She's weird."

"Who is it?" Rin questioned.

"One second, I can't really tell. We're too far back." Rin fought to keep control as Iroha leaned forward, trying to get a better look. Then, she cried, "It's Gum-Gum!"

"Gum-Gum?" Rin repeated in disbelief. "You mean Gumi?"

"Yeah, Gum-Gum!" Iroha said excitedly. "Oh my gosh, it's been so long since I last saw her! I forgot to ask you guys how she's been!"

"Gumi" Rin fell into a bothered trance for a second. Something was bugging her. She felt like something important had happened, but she couldn't remember what. Many memories of Gumi played through her mind, of all the best moments of their friendship, but how could any of those be deemed important in her mind? They all paled in comparison to Len.

"Gum-Gum, over here!" Iroha called, waving to the girl.

"What's going on?" Rin questioned.

"She's just standing up now, looking at all of us. Uh oh, she's gonna fall. And—oh, gosh, what's wrong with her?"

"What? What happened?"

"She was about to fall so Len helped her, then she pushed him away. Is she completely crazy? She pushed him away? Geez, Gum-Gum is so weird."

Rin frowned. Why would anyone ever push Len away? Gumi really was a strange girl, but she was Rin's best friend all the same. It was so great that she'd finally decided to come here. Rin didn't think she ever would.

Rin jumped when she heard her name come from Gumi's lips. All the girls in the crowd stopped to stare at her. When Len stared at Rin and beckoned her forward, the girls parted to make a path for her. Iroha dropped off Rin's shoulders and joined Miki in the crowd. Rin, hesitantly, made her way through the aisle until she stood at the base of the birdcage. Gumi and Rin stared at each other, and Rin tried to decode the raw emotions in Gumi's eyes as the girl smiled at her, on the verge of tears. Then, the green-haired girl jumped down, her school uniform fluttering in the wind as she landed unsteadily in front of Rin. Rin grabbed her to stop her from falling, and Gumi gazed at Rin, looking like she was about to do something important. Rin found herself blushing a little.

"Nuh uh, Gumi," Len said, suddenly beside them, gently pulling Gumi and Rin apart. "I told you, you can't have her in that way."

Rin stared at him curiously. In what way? What had Len been up to while he'd been gone? Gumi glared at Len, resulting in gasps in the crowd around her. She then turned to glare, sickened, at all the girls.

"So, as you can see, Rin is alive and healthy," Len said. "And you can stay here with her forever, if you'll agree to my terms."

Gumi stared at Rin, who shifted uncomfortably, though she spoke to Len. "Can I have a moment alone with her first?"

Len frowned a tad. "Fine, but don't try anything weird on her. It took a lot of effort to purify her mind after the way you'd soiled it."

Gumi rolled her eyes. "Get lost, and take your groupies with you."

"Mean, Gumi," cried Miku from somewhere in the crowd. Gumi jumped a little at the girl's voice and looked for the source, unable to find it in the crowd.

"Okay, everyone, come with me," Len commanded. The girls immediately flocked to him, desperate to get his attention, as he led them far away. Rin was a little jealous. She wanted Len's attention, too.

"Rin."

Rin turned her gaze away from Len to stare at Gumi, who still wore that confusing emotion on her face. Rin's face reddened a little as she looked at her, though she didn't know why.

"What is this place?" Gumi questioned.

Rin was a little perplexed by the question. The answer was obvious, wasn't it? "This is where all who love Len gather to adore him."

Gumi raised her eyebrows. "Wow, so he really is God."

Rin tilted her head to the side, considering whether that word was appropriate. In some ways, it was, but Rin also felt it was a little exaggerated. "I guess you could call him that. Anyway, have you come here to love him, too? It'll be great, Gumi, I can teach you all the things that make Len so amazing!"

But Gumi was shaking her head, so Rin let the rest of her words die before they tumbled excitedly from her lips. Gumi informed her, "I hate Len."

Rin froze, unable to believe such words even made sense. Hate Len? How could anyone hate Len? "B-but—" she started, then she cut herself off, unable to think of how to finish it. Instead, she said desperately, "Maybe I can teach you how to love him. I'm sure I can change your mind if you give it some time."

"No, Rin," Gumi argued. "I can never love Len, no matter what. You're the only one I'll ever love. But I'll stay here and pretend to love Len if it's what I have to do to be with you and protect you from him. I love you, Rin, please remember that."

Rin stared at her, not understanding her words. There was only one person who they could ever love, and that was Len, so there was no way for Gumi to love her. Anyway, Gumi was a girl. That was just weird.

Gumi wasn't done. With a sad smile, she promised, "I'll always love you, Rin, no matter what. Please, please, just try to believe me when I tell you that."

Rin stared at her, unable to answer, because how could she ever believe something so absurd?

Author's Note: Just so you know, I'm one of those people that hates a happy ending. Just saying. Okay, I'm not gonna be home tomorrow so no updates but I'm going to be updating Friday and probably this weekend, too. Okay, too tired, short author's note today

28. I'm a Little Blue Bird

Author's Note: Um, there is swearing in this chapter. I know it's rated teen so you'd assume there'd be swearing, but I really don't swear so yeah. It just felt awkward when I tried to censor it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I'm a Little Blue Bird

As Rin stared at Gumi, trying to understand her words, Len returned. Gumi didn't care to look at him. She simply stared at Rin, hoping that, on some level, the girl understood. Len was obviously annoyed that neither girl had turned to him because his voice was little bitter when he spoke next.

"So, Gumi, what do you think?" he asked.

"Honestly?" Gumi asked him, looking away from the confused Rin to stare harshly into the boy's eyes.

"Honestly," he agreed, that horrid smile stuck on his lips.

"It's disgusting," she informed him. "You brainwash these girls into thinking you're so amazing and that you're a god when, really, all you are is a sick, perverted bastard. I've never heard of something so sick."

Len smile faltered, and that cruelty she'd seen once flickered in his gaze. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he snapped. "Every other girl I've met has been all over me."

"You take them when they're vulnerable, that's why," snapped Gumi. "You took Rin when she was missing me. Iroha's constantly being harassed at school, and you took advantage of that. You took advantage of Miku's confusion over her affection for Kiyoteru. Neru and Haku isolated themselves from everyone, so they had no one to help them when you came after them. You only went after Miki when Iroha and Piko were no longer in

the picture, and you never had much influence of Luka because she was so in love with Gakupo.

"I'm strong, Len, that's why you can't touch me. I know I love my friends, and I know I need Rin more than anyone else in the world. My family has never been there for me, so I've always stood alone. I've never needed to depend on anyone, so I knew how to resist you. Even now, even in this world of yours, you have no sway over me. You can wipe my memories, you can force me to do anything you want, but I'll never be as submissive as these girls."

Gumi smiled. "Besides, why would I ever want you? I love Rin, after all."

"Shut up!" Len roared, grasping Gumi tightly by the shoulders. She bit down on her tongue so that she wouldn't scream and tasted blood. His grip was so strong that it could easily grind her bones into dust. "You want me, Gumi, I know you do."

"Never," Gumi replied coldly, grinding her teeth against the pain. "I'll never want you."

"Then I'll force you to be mine," he growled.

"Will that really satisfy you?" she questioned. "If I'm yours whenever you tell me to be but at all other times I'm hating you with all my heart and sharing that hatred with everyone else, whether or not they'll listen to me, will you really be satisfied?"

"If that's the way it has to be, then it'll have to do," Len growled.

"But there's another way," Gumi told him.

Len's eyes searched hers, calculating. "Which would be what?"

"I'll be yours," she said. "I'll be just like all these other girls. I'll think of you and only of you and forget I ever loved Rin. You can even make me forget, and I wouldn't fight against it."

"And what must I do in exchange?" Len questioned.

"Let all these girls go."

Len laughed at her, thoroughly amused. "Do you really think I value you that highly?"

"I do," Gumi said, undaunted.

Len stared back at her evenly. "What if I agreed to release all the girls I've met since I met Rin?"

"Will you return their minds to the way they once were?" Gumi asked.

"No. It's incredibly difficult to do that."

"Then no deal."

Len's eyes flickered with that cruelty again, and his grip on her shoulders tightened. Through clenched teeth, he wondered, "Why. Not?"

"Because that would kill Piko," Gumi told him. "And Gakupo. And Kiyoteru. If Miki and Iroha both came back and forgot about their love for him, he'd really go and kill himself. Same with Kiyoteru if Miku started calling him 'Hiyama-sensei' or even 'Kiyoteru'. And if everyone came back and Luka was still dead, I don't know what Gakupo would do. I have to . . . I have to protect them. At least all the other girls are safe here. As long as they're nice, you won't hurt them like you're hurting me, right?"

"I'll fucking hurt whoever I want," he hissed at her. "It's my world. I am God. I can do whatever I want."

"L-Len, you're scaring me," said Rin, who had stood witness to the entire scene.

"Rin, watch out!" Gumi cried a little too late, seeing that flash of madness in Len's eye.

Len released Gumi and, in a fit of frustration, slapped Rin across the face with the back of his hand. She shrieked and fell onto the ground, putting her hand immediately to her cheek. Then, she pulled her hand away, and Gumi saw blood on her fingers where a ring on Len's hand had ripped a line on the girl's face.

"You bastard!" Gumi exclaimed, plowing Len over and circling his throat with her hands. "You call yourself a God? You're nothing more than a petulant child!"

"Don't you *ever* speak to me in such a way," he spat, glaring up at her. He grabbed her hands and pulled, making her fall onto him, her face mere inches from his. Then, his hands coiled around her throat, "I don't know why I even bother with you. I hate you so much. All you do is screw things up for me."

"Well, the feeling is mutual, and has been for a long time," Gumi hissed, her breathing laboured due to the constriction on her throat. "So why don't you just kill me and get it over with, huh? Why did you even come back and get me?"

Len's eyes searched hers, trying to find an answer to her question, and then he told her, "I want you to kiss me."

"No way in hell," she hissed.

"If you kiss me, I'll let every single girl here go."

"You have to give them their memories back."

"I will."

"Do you swear it?"

"I swear it."

Gumi stared at him, trying to see if he meant it. As far as she could tell, he did. She peered at Rin, who stared at them, terrified. To save Rin, she'd do anything. She felt Len's hands still around her throat as she closed the small distance between them. She didn't fight back when he asked for more than a peck. All she was thinking of was Rin, of Rin being free.

"Stop it!" Rin screeched.

Gumi jerked away from Len and stared at Rin. Then, Len pulled her back, and his grip on her throat tightened. Her head grew fuzzy. He wasn't letting her have time to breathe, and it was even harder when he was choking her. Then, Gumi felt his hands ripped off her throat.

"Leave her alone!" Rin sobbed, pulling Gumi off Len. "Please, please, don't touch her anymore. Let me do everything you want instead."

"I don't want you," he hissed at her. "I want *her*." Then, his eyes turned back to Gumi as he stood up and faced her. She put an arm protectively in front of Rin, who clung onto her. Slowly, delicately, he proffered a hand. She gazed at it suspiciously. "Please, Gumi, be mine. I'll let Rin go. I'll get her all her memories back."

"A moment ago you said you'd let everyone go," Gumi informed him.

"I lied."

"Then how do I know you're not lying again?"

Len smiled at her sadly, a sense of hopelessness in his eyes. "I'd do anything to have you, Gumi. I love you."

Gumi didn't even bother being shocked, though she heard Rin gasp behind her. Instead, she questioned, "Why do you love me?"

"You're the only one to be honest with me," he told her. "You're the only one to actually see *me*. None of these girls see me. You've seen me at my worst, yet you still came with me."

"I came with you for Rin," she retorted. "I hate you, Len."

"They say love and hate walk hand in hand," Len replied. "Why else would I hate you so much, Gumi?"

"Because you're a sick bastard," said Gumi. "And I hate you."

"Please, Gumi," he begged. "Please be mine."

Gumi looked at Rin, who shook her head violently. But Gumi's decision was clear as day. Gumi smiled softly at the girl and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I love you, Rin," she murmured. "Please remember that, and remember what I've done for you, and live your life as best you can. Live the life that I can't anymore. Go to Tokyo University, like you've always wanted to. Get married. Have a family. Do all you can to be happy, even if I can't be the one who's causing it."

"I can't be happy without you, Gumi," choked Rin, her bleeding face wet with tears.

"You have to try, Rin. You have the rest of your life in front of you."

Rin shook her head. "There's no life without you, Gumi."

"Please don't say that, Rin," Gumi requested sadly as tears dripped down her cheeks. "Please, let me be selfish. Let me take your place, and please leave with a smile. I don't want this to be sad. I want to remember you with a smile, okay?"

"Am I supposed to be happy when my freedom means your confinement?" yelled Rin, a million different emotions flashing across her face. "I'm never going to be happy again, Gumi, I swear it! I'll never be happy if you're stuck here!"

"It's too late, anyway, Rin," Gumi insisted. "He won't let me go now that I'm here, and you know it. He'll keep hurting you if you stay here. I'm doing

what's best." She smiled sadly. "Please be happy." Then, she pulled away from Rin.

"No, Gumi, no!" Rin screeched, clawing after Gumi, but Gumi ignored all of the girl's attempts to recapture her attention. Instead she placed her hand in Len's, staring straight at him.

"You will release her, and her memories shall be fully returned," she commanded. "In return, I shall be yours for all eternity. However, I will not be your black bird. I will be a blue bird to represent my bond with Rin."

"We have a deal," was all Len said.

Then, Gumi heard Rin scream, and then Gumi fell to the ground, her world nothing but black. Then, and icy pain started slowly spreading through her body. Gumi was to be Len's blue bird for all eternity, but that was alright, because, now, Rin was free.

Please, Rin, be happy.

Author's Note: Sniff. I cried writing this. I get really into the characters when I write, so I feel whatever they're meant to be feeling. For example, when Gumi and Rin fought a while ago, I was so tense that I yelled at my mom when she came to talk to me. I apologized later, of course. So, this, actually, was where I originally wanted to end the story. In my mind, this is the perfect ending. However, it's going to be extended two more chapters so that you can see how Gumi and Rin are forced to live their lives always and forever. Oh, and so I can explain the killer sort of. Okay, next up, someone brought up an interesting point: bullying. Rin and Gumi are gay so you'd assume they'd be bullied at school, right? Well, actually, their school doesn't know they're gay, so that's why nothing about that ever happened. And, within their group, everyone is bi I guess so they don't care. Haku and Neru were isolated *because* they were gay and didn't want to deal with people anymore. Iroha I believe mentioned at one point that "people give her a hard time for loving Miki", which is her way of saying she gets bullied. She actually gets severely bullied. In fact, I didn't have a

chance to include this is the story, but the reason she lives with Piko is because her parents disowned her when they found out she loved Miki. Yeah, Piko kind of acts as her personal bodyguard when she gets bullied, if he's around. And then Miki. She's seen as the victim by most since she never solidly returns Iroha's feelings so people think Iroha just harasses her. I'm glad I was able to include that. Also, Len in this, you can choose whether or not he truly loves Gumi or if he just wants her because he can't have her. I've kept him a relatively flat character because justifying villain character tends to annoy me. Okay, thanks for reading :) Review svp! Oops, also, two more oneshot requests are up, pairings NeruxRin and PikoxLen. Read if you're interested!

29. I Secretly Raise My Needles

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I Secretly Raise My Needles

Every day was the same. Every day was meaningless. Every day was empty. Every day it became less and less clearer. Every day it was lonelier and lonelier.

There was a girl named Gumi. She was a girl Rin loved. But did Rin love her as a friend, or more? Rin knew the answer had once been clear, but she couldn't remember now. She couldn't remember any of it. She could barely remember what Gumi looked like. She remembered Gumi had given her a gift once, and, though she had known what it was a couple days ago, she couldn't remember now.

When Rin had suddenly appeared in her room months ago, she'd remembered why she was there. Now, Rin had no idea. That day, she'd known everything. She known that she loved Gumi, and she'd known to what extent. She'd known what kind of relationship they'd had, and she'd known that Gumi had given her a very important gift.

Now, Rin knew next to nothing.

She knew that she loved Gumi, but in what way? She knew Gumi was important to her, but how important? She knew something had happened to Gumi, but what was it? She knew Gumi had done something grand before they'd parted ways, but what had she done? She knew Gumi had told her to be happy, but why had she asked for that?

Rin sat in her desk at school, struggling to dig through the fog in her mind to find the answers to the questions. It had all been so clear when she'd returned—where she'd returned from, she still couldn't say, and the cops couldn't tell her because she remembered that she'd lied—but as days went by, she'd begun to forget, all events since the end of middle school slowly disappearing. She wanted to tell someone, but there was no one to tell.

Rin stared at her teacher, Kiyoteru, knowing she'd learned something important about him, but she was unable to remember it. She'd considered talking to him about it, but she didn't know him well enough. Still, she knew no one anymore. Piko was no use to talk to, and neither was Gakupo. Luka was dead, and Rin had tried talking to her grave in a fit of desperation, but no answer had come. Then, all others she knew were missing, and she had a nagging feeling about it, like she knew where they were but simply couldn't remember.

Rin thought of Gumi again. *She loves me, she loves me not*, Rin chanted in her head as she watched cherry blossoms fall from a tree outside the window, twirling her hair, now falling well past her shoulders, around her finger. She was surprised to see any cherry blossoms on the trees so late in spring. She would have assumed they'd be gone by now.

Rin stared at her notebook, a little annoyed at herself for not taking notes. That wasn't the best way to start a new school year, and she didn't know anyone in her new class well enough to ask to borrow theirs. She used to always borrow Miki's notes when she zoned out.

Rin felt that nagging feeling again. Miki was missing, but Rin felt like she'd seen her since. Where was that? Perhaps it had just been someone she passed by who looked like Miki? No, she remembered talking with the girl. What had they been talking about? It had been a boy, right? Which boy? Piko? No. Gakupo? No. Kiyoteru? No. Rin couldn't quite remember who it was. She remembered a boy, and she knew he was important, but what was his name? What did he look like? Why was he so important?

I came for Rin. I hate you, Len.

Rin tilted her head to the side thoughtfully and stared at the cherry blossoms as the words echoed in her head. So who was it that had said that? It was a girl, but who? Well, at least now Rin could remember the boy's name. Len. Who hated Len?

Oh. Gumi. Of course.

Rin tapped her pen against her desk as she watched another petal drop to the ground. Pretty things dropping dead, like the girls, right? All the girls missing could have been victims of the murderer, right? They all had nice enough hair. Maybe Rin had been taken, and Gumi had saved her. So was everyone else dead?

Improbable. Why would he have taken the girls? Didn't he just kill them for their hair? What was the use in keeping them?

Rin stared at Kiyoteru, wondering how he tied into it all. He caught her staring at him and locked gazes with her, a look of contemplation in his eyes that matched hers, all the while continuing to teach. Then, when the bell signalled lunch, Rin went up to him.

"Hiyama-sensei," she said. "I have a question."

He froze and asked carefully, "What is it?"

"Why did you ask for me to be in your class?" Before he could reply, she stated, "I know you asked for me specifically. I asked the principal."

Kiyoteru carefully replied, "Well, Gumi was a good student, so I thought taking care of you was the least I could do for her after what happened."

Rin's ears perked up. Did he know something, something that she'd forgotten? "After what happened?" she asked eagerly.

"After she went missing," he said, looking a little confused.

Rin drooped and sighed. No, it was something more than that, she knew it. Then, she asked curiously, "Gumi was an awful student, and she wasn't even in your home room. Why does she matter to you at all?" Again, she continued before he replied, a spark of memory returning, "Oh, wait, you were dating her, right?"

Kiyoteru's eyes widened and he shook his head vigorously. "No, not at all! I'd never date Gumi! I mean, she's my student, and—"

Rin smiled triumphantly as she recalled what it was. "Right, I remember! You were dating Miku!"

Kiyoteru froze. "How did you know?"

"Gumi said something about it," Rin replied. Then, her brow creased in concentration and she said, "And I think Miku might have said something about it, too." Then, she realized, "Hiyama-sensei, I have to tell you something, before I forget it again! I can't really remember any details, really, but I *do* know that Miku is alive! Okay? Just remember! She's alive, okay? I swear, and I never lie. Except to the cops, I think. Well, and Len. I know I lied to him." Her mind was foggy again as she tried to remember. "Why did I lie to him? Hiyama-sensei, do you know why?"

Kiyoteru stared at her for moment, contemplating, before saying, "You dated Gumi, right? Did it have to do with that? Len seemed a little . . . obsessed with you."

Rin stared at him, not understanding. "I did? He was?"

Kiyoteru seemed unsure of himself. "Oh, well, maybe I'm wrong, but that's what I understood from what Gumi told me."

"Gumi told you that?" Rin asked, fighting against the fog. She'd dated Gumi? Wait, yes she had. She and Gumi had . . . they'd . . . they'd even kissed, if she remember correctly. Right, yes, they'd done more than that. She'd spent the night with Gumi. She and Gumi had been in love, right? Right? Rin felt exhaustion settling from pushing back the fog. It was so bad that she couldn't even hold herself up. Then, she melted into Kiyoteru's arms and blacked out.

. . .

When Rin woke up, the fog was back. She couldn't remember what had happened. When her parents came in, they brought Kiyoteru with them. They tried to prompt her to tell them what had caused her to faint, but she had no idea. They grew panicked when she informed them that she didn't

even remember what she'd been talking to Kiyoteru about and left them room to call the doctor, leaving Rin alone with her teacher, who was staring at her in disbelief.

"You really can't remember?" he wondered.

Rin shook her head. "I don't know. Why? Was it important?"

Kiyoteru stared at her for another moment before smiling and shaking his head. "Not at all. We were just discussing an assignment."

Rin frowned at him. "I know you're lying. All men are liars. He lied to me, too."

Kiyoteru seemed to know she was talking about Len and told her, "Don't think about that, Rin. It's not important."

Rin clutched at her head, feeling the fog blocking her from remembering what she wanted to know so badly. "Don't lie to me!" she yelled at him, digging her fingers into her hair. "I can't take any more lies! Everyone keeps lying to me! How am I supposed to be happy when everyone has to lie? I don't want her to lie anymore, Hiyama-sensei! She's lying, lying, lying, and he's making her, and he lied to her, too! Everyone is lying, even me! I lied and now I don't even know the truth anymore! I can't help anymore! I could have saved them, Hiyama-sensei! I know I could have! They were right there, right within my grasp, by now I can't even remember where they were! I hate this, I hate this, I hate it all!" She felt herself on the verge of tears as Kiyoteru hugged her, cutting off her yelling abruptly.

"It's okay, Rin," he told her. "Don't try to remember."

Rin shook her head against his chest. "Don't lie to me! If I don't remember, I'll never be able to make up for everything I've done. It's all my fault. I don't know why, but I know I started this whole thing. I know it was my fault."

"Rin, you can't blame yourself for this killer showing up," Kiyoteru told her.

"No, you're wrong," Rin said, completely certain for once. "This has nothing to do with the killer. He's got nothing to do with it. It's . . . it's Len, Hiyama-sensei. Len did this all."

And she fell unconscious again. And, again, when she woke up, everything was gone, and she was too tired to fight against the haze anymore. It was too hard. In the next month, everything was forgotten. Len, Gumi, all her friends, she couldn't remember any of them. She couldn't remember any of her time at school, and, eventually, she forgot Kiyoteru, too, to the point that, when she looked at him at school, she couldn't even remember that he was her teacher. Her parents grew so concerned that they took her out of school and hired a tutor to teach her at home. Rin grew despondent and would disappear for days on end before coming home, each time seeming more and more lost. She took no interest in anything, ever, and she spent all her time staring at her phone, wondering who all these people she had registered were. When she was unable to answer her own question, she would drop the phone on her bed and leave her house, not to return for days. However, no matter how many times she left, she didn't find what she was looking for, and the cycle would only begin again.

. . .

Rin knew her parents were worried about her. Even though they didn't think she listened to them when they spoke, she heard every word, even if she didn't bother answering even the most simple questions they directed at her. They were currently considering putting her into a mentation institution, theorizing two ideas: the first, that she had lost her mind completely; the second, that she was borderline suicidal.

The only time Rin was ever animated was when the news was on, which had led to the second theory, considering word of rape and murder seemed to be the only thing to interest her nowadays. Rin felt a little upset about worrying her parents, but she found feeling anything at all to be too much. After all, if she tried to think of anything, she fainted. If she felt an emotion, she'd want to remember another time when she'd felt that, and then she'd

end up collapsing and completely forgetting what that emotion she'd felt was or why she'd felt it. Being a lifeless doll suited her better now.

It was long past midnight as Rin wandered the streets downtown with nowhere in particular to go. She glanced around her, searching for something, but she couldn't find what it was she wanted, which caused her to feel a vague annoyance. However, she pushed the annoyance aside. If she collapsed now, she'd never find what she was looking for.

A scream tore through the still night air. Rin jumped and whipped her head around. Where had it come from? She was quickly given assistance as the voice called for help. Rin rushed into an alley, where a girl a couple years younger stood against a wall, cornered by a shady-looking man. Rin felt herself grow excited as she watched the scene. She cleared her throat.

"Hello," she said.

The man and the girl turned to stare at her, the man a little panicked and the girl with desperation in her eyes.

"I was just wondering something: are you the one who killed my friend Luka? Long, pink hair?" she wondered.

The man snorted. "Get lost, girly, or your next."

Rin smiled, though she still felt numb on the inside. "So it *is* you." She looked at the girl. Her hair *was* rather remarkable. "Please get out of my way," Rin requested. "I grew my hair out just so this man would prey on me. It's been a long wait."

The girl had already dashed around the man as he was distracted. Then, she hid behind Rin. Rin scowled a little. The idiot should have left. She ignored the man as he shouted at her and instead told the girl, "I'd leave if I were you. If things don't go well, I'd rather not have to worry about you."

"If I leave, are you going to let him kill you?" the girl asked, her voice trembling. Rin could see the girl was forcing herself to stay. All her

instincts must have been telling her to run, but, still, she stayed here in order to protect Rin. Idiot.

"Maybe I am," Rin replied. "Go now so you'll never have to know."

"I can't leave if you're about to let this man kill you!" the girl cried.

Meanwhile, Rin's attention was drawn away as the man grabbed a hold of her. The girl screamed and clung onto his arm that held a needle filled with poison. He let out a shout and tried to shake her off, but his needle was thrown, instead, landing far off but, remarkably, not breaking. Rin shook her head at the girl's stupidity, but a tender smile played on her lips, thinking of someone else, someone who was just as stupid.

"I hate men," Rin said calmly. "You're as bad as girls are. Really, I guess I hate everyone. Everyone lies, and they expect me to lie, too. I can't lie, though. I don't know anything anymore, so how am I supposed to lie? I can't remember anything, but I know that you're a bad man. I can't do anything else, but at least I can kill you, right?"

The man laughed bitterly. As Rin had spoken, he'd managed to shake off the girl and stab a needle into Rin's arm. She'd felt it, of course, but she'd continued to talk all the same. "I'm not to one who's gonna die, girly."

"Right," laughed Rin flatly. "I get to die, right?"

"That's right," he agreed with a twisted smile that reminded her of someone, someone she couldn't remember.

"Okay, but you'll die with me, right?" she questioned.

"You're one crazy bitch," he snorted. Then, he was cut off, and the sound of a bullet rang through the air. Rin watched him crumple to the ground, lifeless, and stared at the gun in her hand. Stupid man. Too full of himself to notice the gun hidden in her jacket, even when she'd held it against his chest.

The poison had made its way into her veins. She crumpled to the ground beside the man, but she was far from dead. The poison had yet to get to that stage. She stared at the younger girl as she ran up to her and fell to her knees, yelling for help.

Stupid girl, Rin thought. Just let me die. I'm done now.

Rin felt her eyes tear up. An image of a green-haired girl was playing in her mind. She didn't know the girl's significance, but she knew that it was going to make her cry. *Please let me be done now.*

Rin stared at the girl she'd saved, wishing that she could be the green-haired girl, instead. But the green-haired girl couldn't be saved. Rin had done all she could, but it still hadn't been enough.

Author's Note: If you were confused at any point in this chapter, I was successful :) I wanted to make the style rather confusing for this chapter to match Rin's confusion. Also, Rin's not exactly suicidal, it's just that she's indifferent. And, if you didn't get it, Len lied, sort of. He returned Rin with her memories. However, those memories were taken away over time. See, he knows how in love Rin and Gumi are and knew her love is so powerful that she'd never let Gumi go, so, in order to keep Gumi, he lied and took her memories away, everything about Gumi and everything from the time since she met him. By association, she forgets about Kiyoteru because of his connection to Miku and Gumi. And, I know most people would just run, but I had the girl stay because there *are* people in the world who would do that. I'd probably be too afraid to do that, but I know some people would. Anyway, next chapter is the last, so awwww :(Oh, also, the poll is currently at a tie so please vote! You can vote for up to two options.

30. Always and Forever

Chapter Thirty

Always and Forever

"Nuh uh, his hair is totally the best part about him," Iroha snapped at Haku, who quickly drew back her opinion and hid behind Gumi. Gumi rolled her eyes. The girl was like a little mouse, and Iroha was the cat. Gumi found this particularly odd because Haku was probably like some massive mouse that could destroy the tiny cat just by stepping on it.

"Idiot, are you really such a child that you think *that's* the best part about him?" Neru questioned with a wolfish grin on her face.

"What else is there?" Iroha asked, tilting her head to the side

"Shh, don't soil her innocence," Gumi said, covering the smaller girl's ears with a smile.

"Oh come on, even Yuki knows what we're talking about," said Miku, braiding Neru's hair until Neru noticed and smacked her hands away.

"I'm confused," said Iroha.

"Don't worry, Iroha, they're just being strange people," Miki told her, patting the girl on the back and placing a finger to her lips for everyone else to see.

Gumi, meanwhile, lost interest and got to her feet, stating, "I'm going to go find Len."

Everyone knew that Gumi was Len's favourite, and a few of them, like Neru, resented her openly for it. She never let on that it irritated her beyond belief. She'd happily be like them, only required to be in Len's presence every so often rather than every single day. She couldn't tell them that due

to her pact with Len, though. Still, she could at least return the dirty look Neru cast her.

Gumi strolled along the swamp, listening to the mud squelching beneath her feet. Her black and white uniform boots were going to be filthy, but Len seemed to have an infinite supply. She felt her blue bird's wings fluttering on her back anxiously. She always grew anxious when she couldn't find Len immediately. That normally meant that he wasn't here, which meant he was busy chasing after his next victim. Every time, Gumi thought of how easily it could be someone in a situation like Rin had been in, and how he could be tearing apart two people in love. She hated him. She hated him with all her heart. He knew that, too, no matter how much she tried to hide it, but he didn't seem to care. It was okay for her to hate him, as long as she would still stay with him. Gumi had tried to understand that once, but it had only left her feeling confused. She couldn't justify his actions by trying to understand.

"Looking for me?"

Gumi stopped and gazed up at Len, who sat on a tree branch above her. He smiled down on her like he always did, pleased that she bothered to seek him out herself and taking it as a sign that she was coming closer to feeling the same for him when, in reality, she only sought him out when she was completely bored and couldn't think of any other way to amuse herself.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"Her name's Lily," was all he replied.

"What's her story?" she asked, looking for anything to cure her boredom.

"Abusive father, dead mother," he replied nonchalantly. "Works as a prostitute now. A lot of purification will be needed for her."

"Have you seen Rin?" Gumi asked abruptly.

Len's eyes flashed with anger and he frowned at her. "You said you wouldn't talk about her anymore."

Gumi shrugged. "I was lonely today. Memories are a comfort when you're not around."

Len's smile returned and he relaxed visibly at her words. She knew that a part of him knew it was a lie, but he still let himself get his hopes up. After all, she had all eternity to fall for him, right? And the only other one who she would ever love was never to be hers.

"I did see her, a few days ago," Len offered. "She seemed happy enough."

Gumi watched him curiously, wondering why he was actually telling her. Normally he'd never let on that he'd seen her. "Oh?" she said delicately, not knowing what might set Len off.

"There's this girl who seems to have taken an interest in her," Len said. "I don't know much about her. I believe her name is Aoki."

"Aoki?" Gumi wondered, struggling to decide whether Len was telling the truth or not. "Where did she meet her?"

"Didn't say," shrugged Len.

Gumi kept her face carefully neutral as she questioned, "You spoke to her?"

Len laughed. "You really think she'd talk to me?" He shook his head. "No, I was considering going after the Aoki girl. She's quite pretty. But, as a gift to you, I left her behind so she could stay with Rin." He watched her carefully as he continued, "After all, you told her to be happy."

Gumi smiled, hiding her disappointment. Yes, she wanted Rin to be happy. Yes, she'd told Rin to get married, to have a family. But that didn't mean she'd ever be completely happy with that. She just had to remember what was best for Rin. Rin would have to forget Gumi eventually, right? "Of course. That's great for her."

"I don't care if you miss her," Len informed her. "You can be honest with me."

Gumi smiled sweetly, growing tense. "Oh Len dear, you know that, were I to be honest, you'd lose your temper with me again. I'm sure we're both happier with me staying silent."

Len scowled, anger flashing in her eyes, as she'd expected. "Yes, but a relationship can't be founded on lies."

Gumi raised an eyebrow. "I take it you don't care to have any hope of a relationship with the other girls in this world, then?"

She expected Len to snap at her, but, instead, he smiled. "You see, Gumi? You can be honest with me."

"But it's easier to lie, Len dear," she said with a sickly sweet smile, tension flashing in her gaze as she stared at him.

Len sighed. "Do you come looking for me you to let me know how much you dislike me?"

"No no, Len dear, it's just your interpretation of my actions that leads you to believe I dislike you," she informed him, inwardly acknowledging that dislike was quite the understatement.

"I'd like it better if you'd be honest with me," he said.

"Well then, Len dear, honestly, I don't care."

Len opened his mouth to argue, then he stopped, looking toward the large bird cage. Gumi watched him curiously, following his gaze. She wondered aloud, "What is it?"

Len's brow furrowed in confusion. "Someone just entered my world. That's strange. People can't usually entered my world without my assistance."

"Which means?" Gumi prodded when he fell silent.

"I don't know," he replied. "It may not be safe. You should stay here."

"Anything is better than sitting around," she informed him. "Besides, I'm more worried about you killing me than any outside threats."

"I'd never kill you," he snapped, that violent cruelty in his eyes as he returned his gaze to her. She almost rolled her eyes at his mood swings.

Instead, Gumi simply smiled in response. "Okay, Len dear. Whatever you say."

Len let out an irritated noise and leaped onto the ground. Gumi folded her wings in order to keep up with him as he walked at an abnormal speed over to the birdcage. As it was, without her wings holding her back as she ran, he'd already started a conversation with the visitor by the time she got there.

"Look, I don't want you here anymore," he whispered harshly and hurriedly.

"That's rude. And I came all the way here to see you."

Gumi froze, not believing her ears. Then, she caught sight of the visitor. Before she could stop herself, she murmured, "Rin."

Rin peered past Len at Gumi, confused. Then, she returned her gaze back to Len, appearing to have lost interest. Gumi's heart shattered as Rin spoke again.

"Come on, Len, you can't turn me away," she insisted. "After I sought you out all on my own."

"Rin, go away," he ordered, casting a glance at Gumi over his shoulder. "I don't want you here. I let you go."

Something flashed in Rin's eyes. "How can you say that?" she shouted angrily. "I have every right to be here! I'm your blue rose, right? You can't just shoo me away!"

"Just go away," he growled through gritted teeth.

Rin pouted at him, then she did something Gumi had never expected to see. With an incredible amount of force, Rin kissed Len, her eyes squeezed shut. Then, as he stood there in shock, she pulled away and said to him, "You're the only one I've ever loved, Len. Please let me stay here."

"Rin," Gumi murmured. She knew that all Rin saw when she looked at her was pathetic desperation. She begged the girl with her eyes to take it back, to say she didn't mean it, but, again, Rin looked at her with nothing but disinterest.

Rin looked away from her again, and her eyes were so forceful, so demanding, as she stared at Len. Gumi couldn't understand. Rin had never loved Len so much before, and she seemed so strange, so different from the Rin Gumi knew. Gumi stared at her, lost, knowing the girl she loved didn't have a care in the world for her anymore.

"Do you want me now, Len?" Rin wondered, her hands wandering along his torso as she drew herself closer, whispering seductively into his ear.

"Because I have more to give you than that." Her hands slid under his shirt, caressing his back, as he stood frozen.

"Len," Gumi said, quietly first, then louder. "Len! Don't do this! Please! You said you love me, right? You love me! Please, I'll give everything, okay? Send her away, don't let her ever come back! Doing that, it might . . . it might" She closed her eyes and forced the words out of her mouth. "It might make me love you!"

Rin stared at her over Len's shoulder and said coldly, "You're so heartless. How can you lie like that? I hate liars."

Len fell to the ground. Gumi stared at him, not comprehending. What was he doing? She looked at Rin, shocked to see a sad smile forming on her face as she stared at Gumi. Gumi stared at her in return, struggling to understand what was going on. Then, Rin held out her hand to show something to Gumi. Gumi followed the girl's arm down to where she was meant to be looking. Cradled in Rin's palm was a needle. Gumi returned her gaze to Rin's bittersweet expression.

"He's gone now," was all she said, tears in her eyes as she smiled weakly.

When Gumi blinked, she found the landscape around her different. Rin still stood there, holding out the needle, but instead of the blue swamp, long grass waved in the breeze, scratching Gumi's legs. Instead of a swamp, she was in a meadow and, Gumi knew, if she'd bothered to look, she would have seen Rin's house. This meadow was the meadow where she and Rin had spent so many days together over the years.

Gumi stared at Rin, who stared back at her. Then, crying softly, Rin asked, "Are you just going to stand there or are you going to kiss me?"

Gumi felt her own tears on her face as she smiled and murmured, "Rin." Then, she dashed over to Rin and wrapped her arms around her. Gumi sobbed into the girl's arms and gripped the fabric of Rin's flowery blue shirt tightly in her hands. She repeated Rin's name a million times, trying to convince herself that Rin was really here, that Len was really gone, that they could finally be together.

Then, Rin grew tired of waiting and kissed Gumi. Gumi had nearly forgotten how amazing Rin's kisses were. She kissed Rin deeper and deeper, intoxicated by the girl's taste. She barely noticed when she knocked them both onto the ground, pinning Rin to the ground as she kissed her. Then, Rin interrupted them.

"I have to tell you something," she said.

"What is it?" Gumi asked breathlessly, eager to return to what they'd been doing.

"I . . . I don't remember who you are," Rin said.

Gumi blinked and drew herself back a little. "What are you talking about?" she questioned, caught off guard.

"I'm sorry. It's just, when I returned to this world, I completely forgot about everything. Well, more like, I *could* remember, but I would go unconscious

from the effort. But, now, the haze is gone, but there's nothing left. Everything, all my memories, are gone. I can't remember you at all. I don't even know your name. I don't know how we met, or even what our relationship was before now. The only thing I know is that I love you, more than anything. I love you so much that I'd easily die for you. I love you so much that I knew that I had to kill Len to save you, even if I can't remember who either of you are. Can you still love me, even if I don't know anything anymore?"

"Gumi."

Rin stared at her, confused. "What?"

Gumi smiled. "My name is Gumi, and I love you, Rin. That's all that matters."

Rin smiled back. "I'm happy."

Gumi felt her smile grow deeper as she murmured, "That's good. That's all I wanted from you, Rin. That, and one other thing."

Rin stared up at her, and Gumi couldn't help but smile at her beauty. Her hair was splayed out across the grass, quite a bit longer than Gumi remembered but beautiful all the same, and her blue eyes glimmered with happiness that mirrored Gumi's. "Yes, Gumi?"

"Promise that you'll be with me no matter what, okay?"

"I'll be with you always and forever, Gumi."

Author's Note: Teehee, I just said I hate happy endings. I didn't say this wouldn't have one. It had to fit with the title. So, instead, I made it a little bittersweet since Rin remembers none of her relationship with Gumi. So, anyway, thank you very much for following my story all the way to the end and cheering me up with all your kind reviews. I was really having a hard time with switching schools, but all your reviews really helped me out when I would come home from awful school days.

So thank you. I'm going to leave the poll for the next story open until around 11pm Monday, so please cast your votes! Also, I'm considering doing a sequel to this story, so let me know if you'd like to see that. I'll be putting up a poll for that. I'm not sure if it would be overkill, though. Anyway, the sequel would involve all the characters in this story along with Aoki, who is the girl Rin saved. She's a Vocaloid3, not an OC, just to clarify. Okay, so, things to make sure you understood in this chapter: Aoki, yeah, just said that. She got Rin to the hospital at the end of the previous chapter, which is why Rin is alive, and she goes to visit her constantly. Then, if you'll recall, the killer threw a needle away when Aoki grabbed onto his arm. Rin then went and retrieved that needle and stabbed Len with it. And, when Len died, his last effort to try to keep Gumi as his own was taking Rin's memories. Oh, also, the shirt Rin is wearing also appeared in chapter 21, when she and Gumi, well, you know. So, anyway, I'm also gonna include some side stories for this, which is why I'm not marking it as complete. See you soon! No updates tomorrow, sorry. These past few chapters have been so emotional to write that I gotta take a break. See you later!

31. Bonus Material

Author's Note: Okay, as chapters aren't allowed to be put up just as author's notes, below is bonus material. I mainly just posted this to say that *Green is the Enemy, I Guess* is the winner. And, in December, I'll be writing a sequel to *Always and Forever*. I'll be starting the new story next week so see you then!

These are who all the tattoos stood for. Ring is included because she had just been invented when I started this story.

Lola- indigo sunset

Mariam- red lily

Meiko- yellow cherry blossom

Sweet Ann- green pumpkin

Miku- pink moon

Rin- blue rose

Luka- emerald wave

Prima- saffron snowflake

Gumi- black (blue) bird

Sonika- burgundy sun

Miki- magenta tulip

Yuki- sapphire ribbon

Ring- brown wolf

Mizki- aqua fan

Iroha- white strawberry

Neru- purple fox

Haku- violet bow

Teto- crimson cactus

Tei- grey daffodil

Lily- teal diamond (never actually mentioned but that's what she was gonna be)

And I accidentally wrote a certain chapter by the wrong view so here's what I had written before I noticed orz. I forget which chapter it was . . .

Gumi's face hit the ground as Rin plowed her over. Gumi was caught completely off guard and rolled instinctively, taking Rin with her. However, in rolling, they found themselves off the pavement of the sidewalk and down the hill leading into their favourite meadow. They broke apart for a little, Rin rolling ahead of Gumi, until they reached the bottom, when Gumi landed right on top of Rin. The two girls exploded in laughter, unable to control themselves. Gumi's hair tickled Rin's face as the other girl threw her head back in laughter. Rin's breath ruffled the green hair and Gumi looked down on her, their laughter fizzling away.

They stared at each other for a moment. Rin couldn't move, and not just because she was captivated by Gumi's eyes. Gumi had her pinned down, and the other girl seemed too distracted to consider moving. Rin considered how easy it would be to tell Gumi right now, how perfect it was. She could wrap her arms around Gumi's neck, then pull herself up and kiss Gumi to make up for the time she messed up two years ago.

Then, Gumi leaped to her feet and started brushing grass off herself. When she noticed Rin still lying there, she offered her a hand, which Rin took.

And, furthermore, Len was actually meant to be Rin's cat for a while but I scrapped that idea. And Gumi's brother was supposed to pursue Rin at one point, which couldn't be included due to time restraints. Same with Iroha's back story, which I'll include in the sequel. Oh, they'll also be older in the sequel. Rin will be in University, and it will continue on after that, too. Lily and Aoki will also be important characters. Okay, this chapter has some content now. See you next week!

32. Today Is Now Declared Screw with Piko

Today Is Now Declared "Screw with Piko" Day!

Iroha was confused when she looked around herself. Until now, it was like she'd been in a daze. She blinked and then, without a second thought, shouted out as loud as she could, "LEN YOU EFFING BASTARD!"

"Iroha," scolded Miki, standing beside Iroha.

Iroha turned to Miki. Miki. Oh God. It was like she hadn't really seen the girl since Len had first come into their lives. Iroha felt tears brimming her eyes, and she wrapped her arms around the girl and buried her face in her chest.

"Miki, I'm so sorry!" Iroha cried. "I really loved you and only you, Miki! I'm so sorry! It was that stupid, stupid Len! When I find him, I'm gonna kill him!"

"Iroha, I believe Len has already been killed," Miki replied. "How else would we be here?"

Iroha pulled away and blinked up at the girl. "Darn it. I wanted to do that. Not fair."

"Iroha."

Iroha gazed at Miki curiously, wondering what the thought that had just stricken Miki was. The taller girl was staring off into space and looked like she was in grief. Suddenly, the same thought struck Iroha. Iroha grabbed Miki's hand and started pulling her through the long grass of a meadow. She stopped for a brief second when she caught sight of Rin and Gumi a little ways away, but it seemed like too intimate a moment to interrupt, so she continued up the hill.

. . .

"I'm home!" Iroha cried as she strode grandly into her apartment. She wrinkled her nose immediately as the scent struck her. "Ew, gross! Piko, don't you ever clean?"

Piko sat there, staring at her in disbelief. She glared at him and said, "Look, mister, I'm not even close to forgiving you for having all that time with Miki to yourself, alright?"

"Iroha?" Piko murmured. "Are you really here?"

"What a stupid question. Of course I am."

Piko stood up gently, as if afraid she'd vanish if he moved too sharply. Iroha scowled fondly at him. She really had missed Piko. Even now, when he was a total mess and probably hadn't taken a bath in weeks, he was the only boy Iroha would ever see. He stood in front of her and gently took her hand, startled by the fact that he could actually hold her. Tears pooled in his eyes before he squeezed them shut and kissed her. Iroha easily kissed him in return, but she quickly drew away.

"How rude. What about Miki?" she wondered, her cheeks faintly flushed as she smiled at him.

"Miki?" Piko questioned, too overcome with joy to say anything more. He turned to Miki, who smiled at him, and kissed her, as well. Iroha was able to tolerate it for what couldn't have even been half a second.

"Okay, mister, back away from my Miki now!" Iroha ordered, pulling him away. "It's been at least five seconds now!"

"You told me to kiss her, you moron," he said, though he was still beaming at her as he separated from Miki.

"Well I get to kiss Miki too!" Iroha insisted. "I need to get rid of Len's yucky taste."

"Oh come on, Iroha!"

"I'm kissing Miki whether she likes it or not!"

Iroha leaped up on the girl and pressed her lips against hers. She pulled away soon enough to smile boastfully at Piko, who glared at her, and listened to Miki giggle.

"So, where is everyone else?" Piko wondered.

"Making out in the meadow," Iroha replied.

Piko blinked in shock and stared at her. "What?"

Author's Note: Although short, this is side story number one, when Iroha and Miki return. Sorry it took so long. I've been swamped, and I was busy plotting the sequel along with the other stories I'm currently working on. Anyway, next up is probably Miku and Kiyoteru. Oh, right, Iroha is speaking everyone's minds with the first thing she said in returning to their world.

33. Will You Still Remember Me?

Will You Still Remember Me?

Miku sat on a swing, swaying back and forth as she stared at the setting sun. Her teal pigtails lay on her lap under her folded-up hands. How long had it been since she'd last been here, in this little park? The last time she'd been here was a week before she and Kiyoteru had decided to run away together. But how long had that been? How long had she been in Len's world? How long had she left Kiyoteru alone, suffering, wondering if she was even alive? Months? Years? Had so much time passed that he'd forgotten about her completely?

"Miku?" came a voice.

Miku turned to the voice and smiled, though her smile looked a little mournful. Instead of replying to the speaker, she spoke to the person standing beside her. "Rin. Maybe you know. How long was I gone?"

Rin, her hand in Gumi's and her hair standing out at odd angles, much like Gumi's, and filled with shreds of grass, considered this for a moment as the green-haired girl beside her shifted uncomfortably, picking pieces of grass out of her own hair and smoothing out the kinks. "Maybe a year? Probably less than that, though." Her eyes were painfully sincere as she apologized, "I'm so sorry. I can't really remember."

Miku turned her gaze back to the sunset and she replied despondently, "I'd have thought you'd have been counting the days since you lost Gumi."

"She has amnesia," Gumi explained, a little defensive.

"I'm sorry," Rin said again, "but could you tell me your name?"

"Miku," the teal-haired girl replied with a small smile. "Remember it, okay?"

Rin smiled in a futile attempt to comfort the other girl. "I will, Miku."

"Good. And be nice to Gumi, okay? She's been waiting for you for a long time."

This time, Rin smiled for the girl who held her hand, and Gumi smiled in return, her eyes filled with a joy that made Miku's heart ache. "I will."

Then, Gumi held something out to Miku. Miku stared at the cell phone in Gumi's open palm as the girl said, "His number is under 'home.' He really does love you, Miku, and time will never change that."

Miku smiled and accepted the phone. She watched Gumi and Rin leave and continued to swing on that wavering piece of plastic. As the couple faded into the town, Miku took the phone and selected 'home.' Delicately, she placed the phone to her ear. She heard a click as the other end picked up.

"Hello?" came Kiyoteru's voice. Miku opened her mouth, but she couldn't think of what to say, and no words came out. "Hello?"

Miku swallowed the lump in her throat and, her voice cracking weakly, she managed, "Hi."

"May I ask who's speaking?"

"Miku."

The other side of the line went silent. Then, breathily, came, "Where are you?"

"At the park," Miku murmured, choking on the tears forming in her eyes. "It's dark out. Can you come get me?"

"I'm coming," huffed Kiyoteru, and she could hear the rustling of clothes and of the house key as the phone fell to the ground. She sat there, tears falling silently, and listened to the silence of his house as the phone was nudged along the ground by a purring cat, until, before her, he appeared, panting and staring at her, not daring to touch her for fear of being proven that this was no more than a dream.

"Teru," Miku murmured, her eyes teary.

Then, Kiyoteru took her into his arms, hugging her against his chest, as he cried. She sniffled and murmured comforting words as she, too, cried, smiling at his warmth as she stroked his back comfortingly.

"I'm home, Teru," she whispered.

Author's Note: Iroha is crazy, but Miku is serious. And did anyone remember that Gumi had taken Rin's cat? And Gumi was living with Kiyoteru, therefore the cat lived there. Random but whatever. Oh and the kinks in their hair and grass = making out in the meadow. Anyway, I mainly wanted to post this to make a request. MY BIRTHDAY IS NOVEMBER 29TH. So, if you write, or make amvs, or draw, I'd absolutely love you if you'd do something for me for my birthday (I'm so self-absorbed). And you know I'm a crazy yuri fangirl so yuri related would be best, but beggars can't be choosers :P So, yeah, you don't have to do anything but I'll love you if you do!

34. I Am a Cat

I Am a Cat

"Iroha, what are you doing?" asked Gumi, not quite wanting an answer as the smaller girl lay along the floor, her shirt pulled up to show her midriff as she dragged herself along the ground.

"Shhh," hushed Iroha, her eyes locked on her target. "You'll scare it away."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem," offered Rin.

"Shhh!" hissed Iroha. Then, she leaped up excitedly, her eyes beaming as she stared at Gumi and Rin. "Did you hear that? Wasn't that awesome? I sounded exactly like a cat, didn't I?"

"Gumi," Kiyoteru called a little impatiently from another room.

"Sorry," Gumi called over to her roommate. She glared at Iroha, who was too oblivious in her excitement to notice.

"Seriously, that sounded like I was hissing, didn't it?" Iroha questioned. "I'm totally gonna win that Hello Kitty contest!"

"At the expense of our cat," replied Gumi, peering around to Rin's cat, who looked unimpressed at Iroha's childish behaviour.

"The kitty loves me!" insisted Iroha, picking up the cat in her arms as it mewled in protest. She rubbed her face against the cat's, cooing, "Isn't that right, kitty-kitty?"

"Um, Iroha, I don't think that's a good idea," insisted Rin, reaching out to grab the cat. But she was just a little too late. The cat screeched and raked her claws against Iroha, who screeched in return and threw the cat away. The cat dashed into another room, and Iroha quickly slammed the door shut, locking it in.

"Stupid cat," grumbled Iroha. "It doesn't deserve to wear the Hello Kitty outfit I brought for it."

Gumi rolled her eyes and shook her head, terribly amused by the entire thing. Rin, on the other hand, rushed to apologize for her cat's behaviour and to clean the tiny wound the cat had left on Iroha's arm.

. . .

"I'm here," Piko said, entering the apartment where Gumi was living with their teacher, looking around awkwardly.

"Piko?" Rin wondered from where she and Gumi lay on the couch watching television. The sight of the two, with Rin lying on Gumi's chest and their fingers interlocked as Gumi wrapped her arms over Rin's stomach, made him go bright red, so he swiftly turned his face away.

"What are you doing here?" Gumi wondered. "Do you need some help from Kiyoteru?"

"Er, no, Iroha asked me to come over. She said it was urgent."

"Piko!" called Iroha. Everyone turned her eyes to her as she ran in front of Piko and thrust a cat in his face. "This cat is a bully. Exterminate it."

Piko blinked at her. "Um, what?"

Author's Note: I have no idea. I just randomly thought of this and had to write it. Anyway, so, I'm considering doing a self-publishing of Always and Forever on Lulu or some site like that, and I was wondering if anyone would actually be interested in buying it if I did. I'd edit the entire story through again before that of course and I'd add in some extras that wouldn't be available on this sight, like Iroha, Piko, and Miki's story. It'd only be like 10 dollars or so, and I could make it an ebook if people'd rather. Let me know :) And if people like that idea, I'd probably also end up doing that for my other stories and have

books that are a collection of oneshots. (I hope whoring myself out like this isn't against fanfiction rules.)

35. Why Piko Can't Sleep

Why Piko Can't Sleep

The apartment door was kicked down, slamming against the ground with a loud thud and forcing Piko to jump out of bed in shock. He'd been fast asleep, but, now, he faced the raging eyes of Iroha.

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, Piko grumbled, "What the heck are you doing, Iroha? Why'd you kick the door down?"

"You got Miki pregnant, you jerk!" Iroha shouted, jabbing a finger toward the boy. Piko's heart seemed to freeze as his eyes turned to Miki, who stood beside Iroha on top of the toppled door with a smile.

"Miki?" he wondered hesitantly. It wasn't that he didn't trust Iroha to be telling the truth. Well, actually, that was exactly what it was.

With a giggle, Miki shyly stated, "She is right, Piko."

"And it gets worse!" Iroha exclaimed, slamming a foot on the ground to get Piko's focus back on her as she glared viciously at him. "You got me pregnant, too!"

Piko could feel sweat breaking out on his forehead. No. There was no way this was possible. He couldn't have possibly—

Before he could finish thinking, Iroha had interrupted him again. "So what are you gonna do about this, Piko, huh? How are you gonna support us and the babies? Miki says she thinks it's gonna be twins for her. *Twins!* That means you're gonna have to take care of me, Miki, and *three* babies! How are you gonna handle this, Piko, huh? *Huh?*"

. . .

"Hey, Piko, wake up!"

Piko jolted straight up in bed, panting and sweat profusely. He glanced around him, wide-eyed, focusing immediately on the door. Seeing that it was still standing, he breathed a sigh of relief and instantly relaxed. It had been a dream, only a dream. He laughed a little at himself. Of course. It wasn't possible for Miki or Iroha to be pregnant. He'd never slept with either of them, after all. Especially not Iroha. He shuddered. That was a horrifying thought.

He jumped back against the headboard of the bed as Iroha, who slept beside him in bed, clambered over him on all fours to stare him curiously in the eyes. "You look suspicious, meow. What were you dreaming about?"

His face burned bright red. She was so close that he could clearly see each of her eyelashes, each darker fleck in her golden eyes. His gaze travelled downward without his knowing, and his face grew redder. The shirt she was wearing was so loose that he could easily see down her top. Quickly averting his gaze, he stated, "Nothing, nothing at all."

She started moving even closer, complaining, "But I wanna know now, meow! Tell me!"

"F-fine, just get off me!" he exclaimed, closing his eyes to avoid looking where he shouldn't. "I dreamed that I got you and Miki pregnant!"

He felt Iroha draw back and thought it safe to turn his gaze back to her. She was sitting at the end of the bed, her head tilted to the side and her curious gaze staring at him. "Is that all? Well, that's stupid. You're a virgin after all."

Piko laughed then and added, "You and Miki, too."

He froze as Iroha's face turned red, and she quickly looked away. He leaned forward, not believing his eyes.

"You and Miki, too, *right*?"

Iroha laughed nervously and stated, "Well, actually, Miki and I once—"

. . .

Piko awoke in his bed, panting and terrified, and looked wildly around him. Iroha was sound asleep behind him. Desperately, he shook her shoulder, and questioned, "Iroha, you're a virgin, right?"

With a groan of annoyance, she turned onto her back and opened one eye to glare at him. "Yeah, stupid. Wake me up again and you'll never see Miki again."

Piko sighed and slumped against the headboard. It was all a dream, after all. Thank goodness.

Author's Note: The idea for this has been running through my head all day, and I didn't know where it would fit so I just added it to the end of Always and Forever. Also, about the hard copies, I'm waiting for my artist to finish the cover – you know who you are – but the editing's done so hopefully that'll be up by the end of July, depends on my artist – staaaaaaare.